BOEING SUPPLIER PUTS SHINY NEW PLANT IN EVERETT

News / Manufacturer

Aircraft-interiors supplier B/E Aerospace has consolidated three business units in a new, expanded facility in Everett and is ready to grow as Boeing production ramps up.

Although a cost-cutting drive at aircraft-interiors supplier B/E Aerospace has shrunk its presence at some locations in the U.S. and overseas, it's doubling down in Washington state to support Boeing's planned production ramp-up.

The last piece of a major consolidation clicked into place over the Christmas holiday, when the final group of more than 300 employees moved down Interstate 5 from an older, leased plant in Marysville into a new $35?million building in Everett.

“We wanted to be close in support of Boeing,” said Trevor Skelly, vice president and general manager at B/E’s flight-structures unit in Everett. “It allows us to react quickly to any emergent needs on their product line and to collaborate easily with Boeing on next-generation products.

“We’ve made a major commitment to Boeing and to this area. We’re sticking to that,” Skelly said. “We are adding more employees here.”

In the gleaming state-of-the-art facility, now employing more than 550 people, dozens of engineers reconfigure 3D models of passenger cabins on their computers and technicians busily make parts.

At most local aerospace suppliers in the state, employees put up with bare concrete floors in drafty, warehouselike factories where typically many production workers make less than $15 per hour.

In contrast, as of the end of 2014, 63 percent of B/E production workers inside this bright and comfortable building made more than $20 an hour, with none making less than $15 an hour, according to data supplied to the state.

3D printers, waterjets

During a recent tour of B/E’s quarter-million-square-foot facility on the edge of Paine Field, a row of seated technicians carefully assembled the passenger-service units, including the oxygen systems, which are installed above each seat in a 787 Dreamliner.

Others cut, sanded, finished and painted small pieces made from reinforced honeycomb paper composite or aluminum assembled into large interior structures such as crew rest compartments and passenger-cabin closets, partitions and galleys.

They used waterjets supplied by OMAX of Kent to machine aluminum into precise shapes. They used 3D printers to build up complex thermoplastic parts including ventilation ducting.

Everything crammed into the confined space of an aircraft cabin must fit exactly, so accuracy in manufacturing is crucial. Inspecting for fit everything they produce, technicians touched a coordinate measuring probe to multiple locations on each small part to verify its dimensions were precise.

In a separate area, certain parts that must perform when a cabin loses air pressure — perhaps a ceiling panel that must pop open — are tested inside a decompression chamber.

Nearby, technicians validated the strength of key cabin interior structures by applying heavy loads at stress points.

On the floor, a human dummy sat ready for use in other tests — for example, to ensure that a relatively small flight attendant can help pull someone through a hatch during an evacuation.

The engineers work apart from all this manufacturing and testing, in their own quiet section of the building.

Besides work on interior details for Boeing, some are designing complete interior retrofits for airlines that want to upgrade their older cabins.

To maximize the use of every inch of space in the 787 and 777 jets, for instance, a concave indent

at the back of a closet provides space for an ottoman for a business passenger's feet.

"A lot of what we do is industrial design," Skelly said. "On the computer, we can make photo-realistic images of something that doesn't even exist today."

When a new design looks right in two dimensions, the research-and-development shop can make a rapid prototype or push a button to produce a small model on a 3D printer.

Rival Zodiac

B/E, headquartered in Florida, has about 10,000 employees in 25 facilities

around the world.

Last year, it made $501 million in profit on revenue of $2.7 billion, an 18 percent profit margin.

Its main competitor in cabin interiors, Zodiac Aerospace, ran into severe trouble during the past two years. It had a labor strike at its seat-manufacturing plant in Gainesville, Texas, and an explosion at a Newport, Pend Oreille County, plant that makes structural composites and assemblies.

When Zodiac struggled to supply high-end passenger seats on schedule, causing delays in aircraft deliveries at both Airbus and Boeing, it drew a brutal public rebuke in January from Airbus Chief Executive Fabrice Brégier.

Julie Tarp, director of interiors at Boeing Commercial Airplanes, said B/E — which makes most of its seats in Northern Ireland — has had no similar delays and described the company as "a market leader in the industry."

Boeing has awarded B/E an exclusive contract to supply the lavatories on all its 737s, including the new 737 MAX, as well as the lighting on those planes for the Boeing Sky Interior, a modern cabin redesign that features extra headroom and LED mood lighting.

On the forthcoming 777X, not all the contracts for interior elements have been awarded yet, but B/E will supply the toilets and the oxygen systems.

B/E's lavatories are built in the Philippines and configured in Everett. The oxygen systems are assembled in Everett.

John Monroe, a former Boeing executive now chief operations officer with the Economic Alliance Snohomish County, said B/E's success and its consolidation in the new Everett facility are "doubly good for the county" as it puts more work here.

Other aerospace suppliers are also expanding in Everett.

Giddens, now part of Cadence Aerospace, leased an additional building last year to accommodate growth.

Terry's Machine and Manufacturing moved into a bigger space, a 40,000-square-foot building.

Onamac, another Everett machine shop, a division of Oregon-based Selmet, will next month begin moving to a bigger space.

As Boeing ramps up production of the 737 and 787 and prepares for the 777X, Skelly said B/E is

“operationally solid and ready for growth.”

He said the company is committed to expanding here “because of the depth of aerospace knowledge in this area.”

“The quality of the people we can find is such that we can build product more efficiently, we can solve technical problems faster and we can innovate more quickly,” Skelly said.

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