

COMAC ROLLS-OUT C919, BUT PROGRAM TIMELINE STILL UNCERTAIN

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After seven years of development marked by repeated delays, China's new **C919** airliner is ready to start ground testing of its avionics, flight controls and hydraulics systems. It made its debut in a roll-out ceremony on November 2. Developed by state-run Commercial Aircraft Corp. of China (**Comac**), the narrowbody rolled off the assembly line in the manufacturer's Shanghai factory on to a crowd of some 4,000 government officials and representatives of foreign program partners. The new twinjet promises a range of just over 3,000 nautical miles (5,555 km) and will be able to seat between 158 and 174 passengers.

Comac believes the C919 will challenge the market dominance of Airbus and Boeing. The company believes it can sell up to 2,000 of the new model over the next 20 years.

However, questions remain as to whether the Chinese group can get the C919 into production in a timely enough way to meet demand from airlines. They now have the option to upgrade to the new

A320neo and Boeing 737 Max aircraft. The C919 program has been plagued by a series of setbacks, including technology and supplier problems, which pushed back its maiden flight, originally scheduled for 2014 to late 2015.

At the roll-out, Comac chairman Jin Zhunaglong said that the aircraft's maiden test flight is now scheduled for 2016, but he declined to be more specific. Foreign program partners have told AIN that they are not permitted to comment on the shifting timeline for the program. However, Comac officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said they were still a long way off from having a complete aircraft ready to fly.

As for deliveries to airlines, Comac said in May 2014 that first delivery would be in 2018 but has since declined to provide an update. The subject was not brought up at the roll-out, however the same officials close to the program said delivery could be delayed to 2020.

Despite uncertainties, Comac said the C919 has amassed 517 orders and commitments from 21 customers, including seven Chinese airlines, two foreign carriers and 12 aircraft leasing firms. Among the foreign customers, Thailand's City Airways has ordered 10 C919s, GE Capital Aviation Services has signed on for 20 jets and PuRen Airlines (a Germany-based, Chinese-backed startup) has signed a letter of intent for seven aircraft.

Although, the C919 is made in China, there is significant Western content in the aircraft. That includes input from engine maker CFM International (a joint venture between GE Aviation and Snecma), which is providing its new Leap-1C turbofan. Other systems are provided by Honeywell, United Technologies' subsidiary Goodrich, Rockwell Collins, Liebherr, Zodiac Aerospace, Meggitt, Eaton and Parker Aerospace.

Here at the Dubai Airshow, the Chinese industry participation falls under the umbrella of the government's China National Aero Technology Import & Export Corp. (Catic), located at Stand 820. o

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