KEPPLAIR EVOLUTION PIVOTAL MILESTONE WITH PROTOTYPE FIRST PRE?MODIFICATION FLIGHT, LAUNCHING KEPPLAIR 72 FLIGHT?TEST CAMPAIGN

News / Maintenance / Trainings, Manufacturer

Having arrived in Toulouse in early August, the first Kepplair Evolution ATR?72 prototype has now completed its inaugural pre?modification flight — a decisive achievement that marks the official launch of the KEPPLAIR?72 test campaign. This milestone signals the transition from development to active flight?test operations for the future multi?role water bomber, designed to strengthen civil?protection capabilities with a new generation of aerial firefighting performance, versatility, and operational reliability. The successful flight validates the programme's technical roadmap and opens the next phase of evaluations that will shape the aircraft's final configuration and mission?ready systems.

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Piloted by Eric Delesalle, the programme's flight test director, a former chief pilot and test pilot at ATR, and Axel Valat, a test pilot at Aerotec & Concept, the aircraft – now bearing Kepplair Evolution's livery – is thus commencing its flight test programme, with a view to certification in 2027. It completed two flights over Toulouse before being grounded until the end of the year whilst it is converted into a water bomber.

The aircraft will be equipped with the KEDS (Kepplair Evolution Delivery System), a next?generation drop system engineered by Kepplair Evolution in close collaboration with the Toulouse Institute of Fluid Mechanics (IMFT), Professor Dominique Legendre, and Trotter Controls — the international reference in telemetry technologies and drop?door systems for aerial?firefighting aircraft. This integrated development effort brings together advanced fluid?mechanics research, precision engineering, and proven operational expertise to deliver a highly efficient, mission?ready solution. The KEDS system will enable the KEPPLAIR?72 to perform rapid, accurate, and controlled drops across a wide range of civil?protection scenarios, reinforcing the aircraft's multi?role capability and its contribution to next?generation aerial?firefighting operations.

The conversion and certification will be carried out by Aerotec & Concept – the European leader in aircraft modifications – which is already housing the aircraft in its hangar at Toulouse-Blagnac.

Following a phase of drop tests carried out in the laboratory at the IMFT on a full-scale test rig, drop tests will continue in flight from January 2027 as part of an operational qualification programme designed to confirm the system's performance under real-world conditions. Following the flight test programme, the KEPPLAIR 72 is expected to obtain, by 2027, the Supplemental Type Certificate issued by EASA, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency. The certification will then be extended to other international authorities, including the FAA, the US Federal Aviation Administration. The KEPPLAIR 72 is expected to be certified and enter service in 2027, offering civil security authorities a modern, robust and rapidly industrialisable European solution.

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Based on the ATR 72 platform, the KEPPLAIR 72 programme is underpinned by a rigorous scientific approach aimed at optimising the accuracy of ground tracks and, consequently, operational performance. With the backing of several recognised industry players, the KEPPLAIR 72 project offers real competitive advantages:

- Rapid time-to-market (using an existing platform reduces time-to-market to 3 years, compared with 6–10 years for competitors, and limits the initial investment);
- Technical innovation in the deployment system, which creates a sustainable competitive advantage;
- Cost reductions, in terms of both development and procurement (-50 per cent), as well as operation and maintenance (-30 per cent);
- Reduction in CO? emissions of up to 40 per cent: reuse of existing aircraft, optimisation of fuel consumption, use of sustainable aviation fuel (SAF)... ;
- Unique versatility of the aircraft, adaptable to customers' needs: dedicated water bomber or multi-role (water bomber, medical evacuation and cargo);
- Experienced management, operating in a buoyant global market and a limited competitive landscape, offering a unique and favourable strategic window of opportunity.

The first two fundraising rounds have been successfully completed, raising a total of €17.5 million, including €5 million in public grants under the France 2030 programme and the ERDF, and a third round is currently underway to support the certification and industrialisation phase of the aircraft. The KEPPLAIR 72 programme has received a letter of interest from the Directorate-General for Civil Security and Crisis Management, and has, since March 2026, benefited from the official support of the State and the Occitanie Region, under the France 2030 plan and the ERDF. It has also received official support from the National Federation of French Firefighters and the French Federation of Firefighting Professions.

This institutional and operational support confirms the relevance of a European solution designed to address the increasing frequency of forest fires and the challenges of industrial sovereignty and territorial protection.

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