KEPPLAIR EVOLUTION REACHES A MAJOR MILESTONE WITH THE DELIVERY OF ITS FIRST PROTOTYPE AIRCRAFT THIS SUMMER

News / Manufacturer

Kepplair Evolution, which recently received official support from the French government and the Occitanie region as part of the France 2030 plan and the FEDER (European Regional Development Fund) for its multi-role water bomber, the KEPPLAIR 72 “Forest Keeper,” is now reaching a decisive milestone with the imminent delivery of its first test aircraft. Based on a converted ATR 72, the KEPPLAIR 72 is a multi-role water bomber with a 7.5-ton capacity and ground refueling capabilities. It is designed for firefighting but can also be used, depending on customer needs, for cargo transport or medical evacuation.

Provided to Kepplair Evolution by its partner ACIA-Aero Capital, the first test prototype - an ATR 72 cargo aircraft - will arrive at Toulouse-Blagnac this summer, where it will be converted into a water bomber by Aerotec & Concept, the European leader in aircraft modifications. This conversion will be carried out using a system developed exclusively for Kepplair Evolution by

Trotter Controls, an international leader in the design and manufacture of telemetry and drop systems for water bomber aircraft. The goal is to begin drop tests by the end of this year, with a view to certification and first deliveries in 2027.

David JOUBERT, President and Founder of Kepplair Evolution commented: "The delivery of our first aircraft in a few weeks marks a new milestone for the KEPPLAIR 72 project, bringing to fruition a program we've been working on for many years. "We have assembled a team of top specialists to develop a multi-mission water bomber that will soon be ready to meet the global demand for renewing water bomber fleets. ATR 72 is already in service in demanding environments - such as northern Canada, West Africa, operations on unpaved runways, etc. Therefore we are confident in the capabilities of this aircraft, which is efficient, effective, and eco-friendly, and we hope to see it conduct its first water-drop tests by the end of this year."

Mark HURST, President of ACIA Aero Group stated: "We became involved in the KEPPLAIR 72 project at a very early stage, through our subsidiary ACIA Aero Technics, attracted by the vision and roadmap carried by Kepplair Evolution. We see strong similarities between this project and the way we developed our own ATR Large Cargo Door conversion programs. ATR is a platform we know extremely well, as we operate the aircraft ourselves within the group, and whose robustness and versatility we have valued for many years. Beyond the industrial aspect, this project also reflects a core value for ACIA: bringing together high-level expertise around a common objective — expertise that would probably never have met otherwise."

KEPPLAIR 72 project aims to provide a rapid, innovative, and sustainable solution to the aging and strained global fleet of water bombers, against a backdrop of increasing wildfires and natural disasters exacerbated by climate change. This is part of an effort to improve energy efficiency and reduce environmental impact, while addressing issues of national sovereignty, regional resilience, and public safety.

ACIA, a key partner in the project

ACIA Group has been supporting Kepplair Evolution since the launch of the KEPPLAIR 72 program through its conversion subsidiary, ACIA IPRC. This partnership allows Kepplair to benefit from ACIA's unique experience in ATR conversions. Meanwhile, by providing Kepplair Evolution with this first prototype aircraft, ACIA strengthens its involvement in the KEPPLAIR 72 project.

The support of a proven ecosystem for key competitive advantages

Based on the conversion of an ATR 72, the KEPPLAIR 72 project leverages the French-Italian aircraft manufacturer's ecosystem and international network, thereby limiting industrial risk, protecting its intellectual property, and building on a solid strategy, all while benefiting from simplified maintenance.

With the support of several recognized players, the KEPPLAIR 72 project offers real competitive advantages:

- Speed to market (using an existing platform reduces time to market to 3 years, compared to 8-10 years for the competition, and limits the initial investment);
- Technical innovation in the water-dropping system, creating a sustainable competitive advantage;
- Cost reduction, in terms of development, procurement (-50%), operation, and maintenance (-30%);
- Reduction in CO emissions by up to 40%: reuse of existing aircraft, optimization of fuel

consumption, etc.;
- Unique versatility of the aircraft, adaptable to customer needs: water bomber or multi-role (water bomber, medical evacuation, and cargo);
- Experienced leadership in a promising global market and a limited competitive landscape, offering a unique strategic window of opportunity.

In collaboration with the IMFT (Toulouse Institute of Fluid Mechanics) and Professor Dominique Legendre, who serves as a scientific advisor, Kepplair Evolution has developed unique expertise based on a scientific approach to the design of delivery systems.

The KEDS (Kepplair Evolution Delivery System) release system, developed exclusively for Kepplair Evolution by Trotter Controls and the IMFT - both international leaders in the research, design, and manufacture of telemetry and drop systems for water bomber aircraft - has made Kepplair Evolution a global leader in the field of drop performance analysis and ground footprint prediction.

KEPPLAIR 72 project harnesses French expertise in aircraft modifications and helps retain strategic industrial skills within the country. Beyond its economic benefits, this project strengthens France’s technological independence in a sector critical to environmental protection. The project helps create or preserve skilled jobs in the French aerospace industry, thereby contributing to the revitalization of the national industrial base.

KEPPLAIR 72 project has received a letter of interest from the French Directorate General for Civil Security and Crisis Management, as part of the renewal of its aerial capabilities for fighting forest fires and as a response to the economic sovereignty challenges facing France and Europe. This project positions France as a European leader in aerial firefighting, while contributing to ecological transition goals through an effective forest protection solution.

A certification process already underway

Certification, a prerequisite for market entry, is a critical phase of the project, requiring a significant investment that is optimized by utilizing an already certified ATR 72 platform. Public funding enables to rapidly initiate the in-depth technical studies and testing required to obtain the Supplemental Type Certificate from the EASA, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency, and subsequently from the FAA, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration. This approach significantly reduces the certification timeline—and thus the time to market—with the aircraft expected to enter service as early as 2027.

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