THE BELUGAXL AIRLIFTER BRINGS A “SMILE” TO AIRBUS’ PRODUCTION NETWORK

News / Manufacturer

The successful first flight of Airbus’ BelugaXL oversize airlifter marks an important milestone in further enhancing the company’s industrial network to support its production output – including the ramp-up in assembly rates for single-aisle and widebody commercial jetliners.

With an instantly recognisable livery – featuring a whale-type smile that was chosen by Airbus employees in a vote that attracted almost 21,000 participants – the no. 1 BelugaXL’s 19 July maiden takeoff initiated a 10-month, 750-flight hour certification campaign that will use two of the highly modified derivates of Airbus’ A330-200 freighter.

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"The aircraft behaves really well in flight," said Christophe Cail, Airbus Chief Test Pilot and captain for the four-hour, 11-minute first flight from the company's Toulouse, France headquarters site. "It's impressive how close the BelugaXL's performance is to what we experienced in the ground-based flight simulators. First flights take a lot of preparation and we are just the tip of the iceberg, so 'thank you' to the entire team. It's only together that we can make it fly."

The BelugaXL has 30 percent more capacity than Airbus' current Beluga ST airlifters.

As the replacement for Airbus' current Beluga ST airlifters – which were derived from earlier-production A300-600 jetliners – the BelugaXL features a fuselage that is seven metres longer and an enlarged upper fuselage that is one metre wider.

BelugaXL's greater size enables the new-generation airlifter to accommodate a set of A350 XWB wings, for example, speeding up their transport from the Broughton, UK production site to the programme's final assembly line in Toulouse. The aircraft also can carry the A350 XWB's largest fuselage section with room to spare. Additionally, the BelugaXL's 30 percent extra capacity compared to the Beluga ST provides potential to meet ramp-up needs in meeting the global customer demand for Airbus single-aisle and widebody jetliners.

Once in service, the fleet of five BelugaXLs will replace the similar number of Beluga A300-600 ST airlifters operated by Airbus Transport International – Airbus' fully-owned oversize transport subsidiary. Each aircraft will perform between 900 and 1,000 flights per year, logging some 1,700 to 1,800 hours annually in servicing 11 line stations at locations across the company's European industrial network.

The initial BelugaXL to enter operation in 2019 with Airbus Transport International will be the second-built aircraft, followed by two BelugaXLs during 2020, and one each in 2021 and 2022 – enabling the Beluga STs to be retired during the 2021-2023 timeframe.

26 JULY 2018

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