AIRBUS HAS A SWEET HOME FOR U.S. A320 PRODUCTION

News / Manufacturer



Airbus's U.S. Manufacturing Facility in Mobile, Alabama, opened last September, could augur well for increased production in Southeast Asia. A320-family airliners are already assembled in Tianjin, China. The U.S. facility rounds out the manufacturer's production strategy for its high-selling A320 family of aircraft:"building close to its customers." Airbus expects all aircraft built on the new line to go to U.S. customers, according to company president and CEO Fabrice Brégier.

Former FAA Administrator Allan McArtor, chairman and CEO of Airbus Group, Inc., Airbus Group's holding company in the U.S., noted, "It's part of our global industrial strategy to be located in Europe, China and the United States." Europe traditionally was and remains a strong Airbus market, while China and the United States will represent the world's two largest single-country markets throughout the foreseeable future.

Asked by AIN if Airbus now plans any new A320-family assembly facilities in Mexico or Latin America, where several customers have placed large orders for the models, Brégier replied, "No."

He elaborated: "Despite the growth in the Latin American market, it is much smaller [than the U.S. market]." Airbus plans to deliver all Latin American and Mexican customers' A320-family jets from its assembly lines at Toulouse and Hamburg.

Barry Eccleston, Airbus Americas president and CEO, confirmed that Airbus has no current plans to developA320-family assembly lines anywhere else. Other than potentially doubling the capacity of the Mobile line, a step Airbus is already considering, its most logical step to increase single-aisle

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production even further “would be a new line in Hamburg,” Eccleston said.

Eccleston also ruled out any thought Airbus could decide in the near future to add a widebody completion facility at Mobile, as it plans to do for the A330 at its Tianjin location. “We have not thought of any plans like that–our first step is to prove what we can do here” in assembling A320-family aircraft, said Eccleston. “If anything, development at Mobile will be even more into the single-aisle market.”

McArtor called Mobile “our industrial home” in the U.S., because of the close relationship the manufacturer and the city have built since Airbus announced the Alabama site in 2007 as the production site for its U.S. Air Force tanker deal (later quashed). He cited Mobile’s “great capabilities technically” as a reason for locating the A320-family line there.

Also important to Airbus in choosing Mobile is that the Mobile Aeroplex at Brookley, where the A320-assembly facility is located, is just four miles from the city’s downtown area and a similar distance from the Port of Mobile, a large deep-water seaport. Airbus can transport A320-family major assemblies such as fuselage sections on ships from Hamburg’s vast seaport to Mobile and then truck them in less than an hour from the port to the assembly line.

U.S. Demand Forecast

Airbus foresees a market for “close to 5,000” large single-aisle jets in the United States over the next 20 years, said Brégier. (Airbus’ *Global Market Forecast 2015-2034* predicts a market of 4,700 aircraft for North America, but Airbus has no significant new A320-family orders from Canadian carriers.)

Eccleston said the manufacturer is expecting to win a 40 percent share of that market, 1,880 aircraft. This implies selling an average of 94 large single-aisle aircraft a year in the U.S. annually throughout the next two decades.

Airbus is initially planning a maximum production rate of 48 to 50 aircraft a year from the Mobile line, a rate it expects to achieve in late 2017. Since that is only half of the annual rate at which Airbus expects to sell new single-aisle jets to U.S. customers through 2034, there appears no need for the manufacturer to direct any Mobile-built aircraft to customers outside America.

Although Airbus has secured rights to acquire another 116-acre plot of land adjacent to the existing 116-acre area occupied by its Mobile final assembly facility, a move which would allow it to double Mobile production, the rate could increase to a maximum of only 100 aircraft a year. This is virtually the same number of single-aisle aircraft Airbus expects to sell in the U.S. annually, so doubled production at Mobile could still be absorbed entirely by the U.S. market.

Its Mobile assembly line is the most modern and environmentally friendly facility Airbus has yet built: from the outset of operations the plant’s buildings have been awarded LEED Gold or Silver environmental certification. However, at the Mobile Aeroplex, Airbus has kept with company tradition in naming its main assembly hangar ‘Hangar Nine.’ Airbus first gave this name to the main assembly hangar at its Hamburg A320-family line and subsequently also adopted it for the main assembly hangar at Tianjin.

By September, Airbus employed 260 assembly-line staff at Mobile, many of them hired locally and trained in Hamburg and Toulouse for six to nine months. During the learning curve as Airbus ramps up to full production, the company will continue to hire and train employees from the Mobile County area. When it achieves its planned “Rate Four,” Airbus will employ approximately 1,000

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people in Mobile. Doubling the annual production rate to 100 aircraft would add many more employees.

Engines Travel By Road

Airbus North America Engineering at Foley, on the other side of Mobile Bay from the Mobile Aeroplex, will handle podding the CFM International LEAP-1A and Pratt & Whitney PW1100G-JM engines for the Mobile-built A320neo-family aircraft, expected to start in 2017. The engines will be trucked from Foley to the assembly facility.

P&W says it will truck PW1100G-JM engines to Foley from its lines at West Palm Beach, Florida, or Middletown, Connecticut, “depending on Airbus’s need.” However, initially, all CFM LEAP-1A engines will be assembled by Snecma at its Villaroche facility in France, according to CFM. So CFM will fly LEAP-1As to Alabama for Mobile-produced aircraft.

Several subcontractors are performing facility and production functions at Mobile. One is AAA Aerospace USA, which will install engines on all airframes once assembled. Another is MAAS Aviation, which will paint assembled aircraft in a high-tech new hangar with its own oil-and-grease-free compressed air system. Additionally, Honeywell built and is operating the Airbus Mobile facility’s powerhouse, which provides all other compressed air the site requires, and all chilled and hot water.

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