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The Boeing Next-Generation 737-700 reached an altitude of 41,000 feet recently, flying higher than any other 737 in aviation history.

Flying up to speeds of .81 Mach, (464 knots or 535 mph) Boeing pilots, Capts. Mike Carriker and Paul Desrochers, flew the second 737-700 flight-test airplane to its altitude record during the newest 737 model certification testing for climb and descent.

After the record-breaking flight over Washington State, Carriker said the airplane performed extremely well.

"The airplane maneuvered very smoothly. The flight was terrific and the airplane handled as we expected," said Carriker. "The cockpit ambient noise was low and the flight was very pleasant."

The Next-Generation 737-600/-700/-800 models will be certified at a maximum altitude of 41,000 feet. The current 737s fly no higher than 37,000.

"It's nice to fly above everyone else," he said. "It gives airlines more options to avoid the winds and bad weather. It also provides route flexibility due to air traffic."

Modifications to the Next-Generation 737's wings and engines provide improved fuel capacity, fuel efficiency, speed and range. The total wing area is increased by 25 percent to 1,340 square feet (125 square meters), providing 30 percent more fuel capacity for a total of 6,878 U.S. gallons (26,136 liters).

"This program milestone validates our three-and-a-half year commitment to our customers to design and build a family of airplanes that fly higher, farther and faster," said Jack Gucker, 737/757 Programs vice president. "It's no wonder 26 airlines worldwide have ordered 535 new Next-Generation 737s, making it the fastest-selling and most popular jetliner in history."

The airplane's range will be approximately 3,000 nautical miles (3,454 statute miles or 5,556 kilometers), an increase of up to 900 nautical miles over current-production 737s. This will allow U.S. transcontinental flights and increased 737 route capability throughout the world.

The 737-600/-700/-800 models are powered by new CFM56-7 engines produced by CFMI, a joint venture of General Electric of the United States and Snecma of France. The CFM56-7 will have a 10-percent higher thrust capability than the CFM56-3C engines that power today's 737s. Commenting on the engines, Carriker said, "the climb performance of the engines was excellent."

The Next-Generation flight-test program consists of 10 airplanes, including four 737-700s, three 737-800s and three 737-600s. Each model's flight-test program is planned to last approximately seven months and will consist of more than 2,300 in-flight test hours. The first Next-Generation 737 -- the -700 model -- made its maiden flight Feb. 9, 1997, from Renton Municipal Airport in Renton, Wash. Certification by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration and the European Joint Aviation Authorities is scheduled for late September.

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