Boeing Begins Flight Testing Upgraded Mission System Aboard NATO AWACS Aircraft

Boeing [NYSE: BA] has begun mission system flight tests on the first of 17 NATO AWACS aircraft upgraded under the $1.3 billion Mid-Term Modernization program.

The tests culminate seven years of engineering, manufacturing and design, and through operational scenarios will demonstrate the upgraded capabilities of the NATO customer's mission system.

Testing is scheduled to be completed in March 2005.

The modernization includes integration of state-of-the-art enhancements to the fleet's computers, displays, communications, navigation and target identification systems. Hardware to retrofit the rest of the fleet is currently in production.

"This highly flexible mission system provides NATO AWACS aircraft with the ability to receive mission orders via software from a remote location and updates via satellite data links," said Mark Ellis, Boeing NATO AWACS programs manager. "The system will electronically integrate the updates into the mission computing system, significantly enhancing the fleet's capability."

Another upgrade provides an improved picture of the battlespace with the integration of data from various sensors on board the AWACS, as well as from other sources, and an increased capacity in the number of targets it can track.

"The new capability also allows increased interoperability with more assets including other AWACS or AEW&C fleets, ground stations, fighter aircraft, UAVs, ships and satellites and is combined with an updated Identification Friend or Foe system," Ellis said. "All of this results in improved air traffic and battle management."

Ellis says five additional operator consoles integrated with the mission system enhancements will extend the entire fleet's capability as well as the life of the aircraft by allowing two AWACS to cover the mission of three in certain situations.

Following successful mission system testing by Boeing, NATO will conduct an operational test and evaluation program. Retrofit of the entire fleet is expected to be completed in 2008.

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