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Boeing [NYSE: BA] marks an engineering milestone today as company engineers complete 90 percent of the drawings for the newest 737 family member, the 737-900ER.

The milestone means that nearly all of the engineering work necessary to build parts and tools for assembly has been completed and released to manufacturing.

"This is a critical milestone for the airplane as we make the transition from the development phase to the production phase," said Mike Delaney, 737 chief project engineer. "With most of the drawings complete, our suppliers and fabrication plants can begin manufacturing detailed parts."

The design milestone was reached right on the target date, as Boeing works to begin final assembly of the first 737-900ER this spring at the company's Renton, Wash., manufacturing facility.

Launched in July 2005 with a 30-airplane order from Indonesian carrier Lion Air, the 737-900ER is designed to carry up to 215 passengers and fly up to 3,200 nautical miles (5,925 km).

The first 737-900ER is scheduled for delivery in the first half of 2007 after a five-month flight test program, which will include two flight test airplanes.

The newest derivative design incorporates an additional pair of exit doors, a flat rear pressure bulkhead, and aerodynamic and structural design changes that enhance low-speed and cruise performance. These changes include strengthened wings, a two-position tailskid, enhancements to the leading and trailing-edge flap systems, and optional Blended Winglets and auxiliary fuel tanks.

Powered by the CFM International CFM56-7B turbofan engines, the new derivative will have substantial economic advantages over the competing A321 including 9 percent lower operating costs per trip and 7 percent lower operating costs per seat.

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