



HEXCEL PREPARES FOR MORE COMPOSITES IN COMMERCIAL AIRCRAFT

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Carbon fiber supplier **Hexcel** Composites is preparing for a predicted increase in **composites** demand, as current programs see production accelerate and as future commercial aircraft require **more** parts made of the material.

Plans call for Hexcel's new \$174 million factory in Péage-de-Roussillon, France, to begin supplying material to Airbus and Safran early in 2018. The company mainly delivers pre-impregnated carbon fiber textile for the A350XWB and the CFM Leap turbofan's nacelle, while it provides raw fiber for the engine's fan blades. Airbus and Safran had expressed a need for a carbon fiber factory in Europe.

Hexcel said it can now increase its output to support further production hikes of the A320 and Leap-1A-powered A320neo. "We have plans for up to 63 A320s a month," Patrice Buisson, Hexcel's Airbus program director, said during a press briefing in Paris on September 17.

Hexcel expects the proportion of its revenues that come from A350XWB work to rise from 20 percent to 30 percent. Among other A350 XWB components, Airbus suppliers make 90 percent of the fuselage's frames and all stringers of Hexcel carbon fiber.

On future aircraft, a further step would involve making all fuselage frames of composites. Using more flexible resin as the matrix would allow them to better absorb an impact. More integration between the airframe and cabin interiors might also improve manufacturing; for example, the structure of a monument might comprise part of the airframe. The automotive industry could inspire shorter curing cycles for aerospace, in a bid to accelerate production and cut costs.

Hexcel aims to develop all the technologies for an aircraft—possibly a narrowbody—that would enter service in 2030. The share of composite materials could then reach 70 to 75 percent of the total weight, a further expansion over the A350's 53 percent. Composites might conquer areas such as the wing's framework.

A single-aisle aircraft making such extensive use of composites would weigh 10- to 15 percent less than its aluminum equivalent, according to Buisson.

In the shorter term, Hexcel is pitching ideas for the yet-unlaunched A380neo. "We are telling Airbus some components may be downsized," Buisson explained. The share of composites on the A380 now totals 23 percent.

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