

NAL confident of desi civil aircraft project taking off

No Commitment On Funding From Centre Yet

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On Wednesday, Saras, the Light Transport Aircraft (LTA) developed by the National Aeronautics Laboratories (NAL) completed a successful 40-minute flight, bringing back hopes of



revival, even as no funding has been committed so far. The project, which was first conceived in 1989 was to be shelved after the aircraft's infamous crash in March 2009, but was given a second chance by the Centre in late 2016, the announcement about which came in Aero India 2017. TOI caught up with NAL Director Jitendra J Jadhav, who spoke about the challenges of Saras and other programmes. Excerpts:

Wednesday's was a textbook flight, how many more Saras flights are planned before production?

We've reviewed the flight data from Wednesday and yes it was a complete success, but



Light Transport Aircraft Saras completed a 40-minute flight on Wednesday

before going into production we will need at least another 15-20 flights to have enough data to begin the limited series production (LSP). Once we have that data, we'll be ready to move into producing three LSPs production. The second flight is scheduled for January 31.

You'd estimated Rs 400 cr to Rs 500 cr for three LSPs, has there been any commitment on funding?

We received enough funding to make the aircraft fly, which is a positive development as there would be nothing to show otherwise. Since this was only a retro-modification, the cost was not too high. The total project cost will now be around Rs 350 crore to Rs 375 crore. Also, we were

waiting for this event to be a success and are hopeful that the other test flights will also meet all parameters. Now that we have got the vehicle to get airborne, we will have to make a proposal before the minister, who will take it to the Cabinet.

Saras' weight has been a concern, is it still overweight?

You are right, the 14-seater aircraft now weighs about 7,100-kg, about 500-kg more. But since all that we were doing was retro-modifications, we could not carry implement weight optimisation. But everything has been planned and when we make the production version, which will be a 19-seater, the aircraft see a weight reduction of about

500kg to 600kg, we are confident about it. But the overall weight, with the passengers and fuel will be over 7,000kg.

Rear propellers aren't preferred by aircraft makers, what are the challenges with Saras?

Saras is a pusher configuration (where propellers are behind the engine and push the plane), while other aircraft are in tractor configuration with the engine on the wings and not at the stump (pulling the plane in the air). We've improved the performance within the configuration and will improve other performance also, with autopilot and digital electronics. So we don't think there is a need to change the configuration.

Has there been any progress on the 70-seater plane and the NM5-100 5-seater?

We are in the process of reviewing the older designs and project of the 70-seater plane. Once that is complete, we will go to the government with the preliminary definition stage, which will take about 18 months. Then, we'll go in for sanction and production. So far as the NM5-100 goes, it is a joint venture with Mahindra Aerospace, while we are ready, the private firm isn't coming forward and we've not been able to make much progress. We are still in talks.