



AIRBUS DROPS ELECTRIC LIGHT AIRCRAFT FOR LARGER E-FAN X

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Citing the rapid progress in electric propulsion, Airbus has dropped plans to produce the E-Fan family of light aircraft and is working instead on a larger and more powerful aircraft, dubbed E-Fan X, that could fly within three years.

Originally Airbus planned to produce the two-seat E-Fan 2.0 trainer and four-seat E-Fan 4.0 tourer with electric-driven ducted fans. The company in 2014-15 announced that an Airbus subsidiary, Voltair, would work with French general-aviation manufacturer Daher-Socata to produce the E-Fan 2.0 at a new factory in south-west France, with deliveries to begin by early 2018.

But electric aircraft propulsion is developing rapidly. The E-Fan 1.0 technology demonstrator, first flown in March 2014, has two 30-kW (40-shp) electric motors driving dual ducted fans. In July 2016, motor developer Siemens flew an Extra 300 aerobatic aircraft with a 300-kW electric drive.



“That is a 10-times increase in our ability to deliver power in flight,” says Stefan Schaffrath, head of media relations for Airbus Commercial Aircraft. “Three years ago we kicked off the E-fan. Today we are evaluating if we could fly an E-Fan X in the next three years that would be 2 megawatts—another order of magnitude change.”

Airbus and Siemens signed a collaborative agreement in April 2016 to demonstrate the feasibility of hybrid-electric propulsion by 2020, as a precursor to developing a commercial aircraft with fewer than 100 seats that could enter service by 2030.

“For a single-aisle-scale aircraft with hybrid-electric propulsion we’re talking 20-40 megawatts of power,” Schaffrath says. “Whether this will take another three years to happen we don’t know, but for sure we need to build the 2-megawatt demonstrator and see how the technology turns out.”

Since launching the E-Fan 1.0, and flying it across the English Channel on battery power in July

2015, Airbus has upgraded the demonstrator to hybrid-electric power. The company has also launched two projects to demonstrate electric vertical-takeoff-and-landing urban air vehicles: the single-seat Vanaha at the end of this year and four-seat CityAirbus at the end of 2018.

“If we are reconsidering E-Fan now it is because we are shooting—as a leading aircraft manufacturer—for something more ambitious and timely, and the current E-Fan project would not have been able to scale up to this ambition,” Schaffrath says.

E-Fan X “is about preparing our future, coming out with the right answers at the right time. We are setting ourselves an ambition that goes well beyond E-Fan,” he says. “It is entirely conceivable that we could have hybrid electric single-aisle aircraft, we don’t know when though.”

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