

India to revive three passenger plane projects, looks to tap feeder routes

India plans to revive its three-passenger plane programmes, the 14-seater Saras, the five-seater NM-5 being developed with Mahindra Aerospace and a 70-seater regional transport aircraft (RTA-70) as it looks to meet the growing demand for planes to connect small airports in the country.

The country expects to connect small towns with main metros through its regional connectivity scheme (RCS) by offering incentives to airlines to fly small planes. The government is looking to offer incentives, including relief in aviation turbine fuel, reduced landing and parking charges and set up a regional connectivity fund to subsidise air travel to the hinterland.

To meet the anticipated demand, the government says it would need locally built aircraft so that the benefits are reaped by Indian entrepreneurs.

The first of the planes is to bring NM5, a five-seat passenger aircraft co-developed by National Aerospace Laboratories (NAL) with Mahindra, to India and certify it by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), Union Science and Technology Minister Harsh Vardhan said at the Aero India show.

NAL will revive its three-decade-old Saras project, which was grounded after a crash in March 2009 that killed two engineers and a pilot. The 14-seat plane, named after the Saras crane, has been reconfigured based on recommendations of an expert committee that investigated the crash. It will also be expanded to a 19-seat configuration for civilian purposes over the next two years.

“Ground testing has already been done and in the next one and a half months it will begin the official flight tests and initially some 25 flights have been planned,” said Vardhan.

NAL needs around Rs 400 crore for two prototypes that would be funded by the Indian Air Force.

“For these two limited series production aircraft, we need about 400-500 crores for the full production and the final production will be taken care of by the Air Force which they will fund the money,” said NAL Director Jitendra J Jadhav.

NAL will also revive its RTA-70 passenger plane project, which it first proposed in 2007, and has asked aero-engine maker Pratt and Whitney to build a turbo-prop engine for the passenger aircraft. The project is estimated to cost around Rs 4,000 crore and would involve local industry players and a global partner to take it to the global market.

A feasibility study by NAL estimates around 250-300 such aircraft for India over 20 years and global demand of 7,000 planes that can complete trips of 800 km. It also could potentially replace the AN32 and HS 748 aircraft of the IAF.

NAL has transferred the technology of its 2-seater Hansa, a composite light aircraft for flying training to Mesco Aerospace Pvt Ltd, to produce and market the aircraft. The plane will also be used as a platform for flight testing and experimentation of new technologies by NAL.