

Lighter, stronger Saras set to fly again within next three months

BENGALURU: India's ambitious multi-role transport aircraft project seems to be on a revival mode. National Aerospace Laboratories (NAL) has reduced the aircraft weight and got engines with more power to put Saras project back on track. It is likely to take to the skies again in the next three months.

Indian Air Force (IAF) is backing the 14-seater aircraft project that had almost hit a dead end due to weight issues and a major mishap in 2009. "The IAF recently sent a letter stating they are still interested in the aircraft," a senior NAL official said.

The aircraft was overweight by 500 kg. "Weight optimisation has been done. Metal wings have been replaced with those made from composite materials and even the fuselage has been structurally optimised to reduce its weight by 500 kg," the officer, who is associated with the project, said.

Saras also got the more powerful Pratt & Whitney 1200 SHP engines over the earlier 850 SHP ones. NAL is now preparing for ground tests and hopes to start flight tests in two-three months.

On Thursday, Union Minister of Science & Technology Dr Harsh Vardhan told media persons that the project has been revived with modifications after considering the recommendations of a committee that looked into the 2009 accident.

Jithendra Jadhav, Director of NAL, said Saras will be in action within the next one-and-half months. NAL has made many changes in the aircraft and integrated latest systems, he said.

On funding, the NAL director said they do not need any additional funding as they received funds from CSIR. "In the next phase, we need around Rs 400-500 crore for production of two Limited Series Production aircraft and IAF will fund it," he added.

Jadhav also said they are looking at options of a stretch version of Saras in the 19-seater configuration.

In an attempt to boost domestic air operations, NAL has tied up with Mahindra Aerospace Pvt Ltd to have a plant in India to start production of the C-NM5 aircraft in India.

Speaking at a press conference, Union Minister of Science & Technology and Earth Sciences, Dr Harsh Vardhan said, "The five-seater C-NM5 was designed by NAL and fabricated by Mahindra in association with a laboratory of Australia. Now they have agreed to bring it back to India. In the next few months, we will get certifications from authorities concerned. Production of the C-NM5, which can be used as an air taxi, is expected to start in another 18 months from now."

NAL said, "Studies have been carried out regarding developing a Regional Transport Aircraft (RTA). The feasibility study forecast about 250-300 aircraft for India (20-year demand), over 7,000 RTA class of aircraft in the international market and about 150 aircraft for military transport in India (replacement for A 32 and HS 748).