

General Atomics performs first flight of next-generation Predator

Flight Global

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General Atomics Aeronautical Systems has carried out the maiden flight of its Certifiable Predator B (CPB), ahead of delivery to launch customer the UK's Royal Air Force in 2018.

Performed at the company's Gray Butte flight operations facility in California on 17 November, the sortie kicks off a two-year qualification effort for the unmanned air vehicle.

In November, the US state department approved the sale of up to 26 CPBs worth \$1 billion to the RAF, comprising 16 firm orders and 10 options.

Deliveries will begin in "late 2018", says General Atomics, once the UAV has been declared compliant with NATO and UK airworthiness regulations.

"The first flight of our Certifiable Predator B aircraft is a major milestone in our progression towards delivering an RPA [remotely-piloted aircraft] that meets all airworthiness requirements," says Linden Blue, General Atomics chief executive.

"The CPB is the first RPA system of its kind to be compliant with an international type-certification standard, and can therefore be more easily integrated into civil airspace operations around the world."

Three UAVs will be used to support the qualification testing phase, with two further examples built for full-scale fatigue and static tests.



The first CPB being produced. General Atomics Aeronautical Systems

The UK is the first customer for the type, although the US Air Force is updating its existing fleet to the new standard – a further sale of retrofit kits, worth some \$39 million, was announced on 21 November. This covers modification equipment for 23 of the USAF's Block 5 MQ-9 Reapers, plus options for 95 more, General Atomics tells FlightGlobal.

To date, 49 USAF aircraft have been modernised, with upgrades including an extended-range capability provided by auxiliary external fuel tanks and new wings. New-build CBPs have increased internal fuel capacity as well as the new wings.

The Block 5 variant of the MQ-9 Reaper is also being acquired by Spain, and the company is looking for local suppliers to support the programme.

Madrid ordered four aircraft plus two ground control stations in February 2016, and General Atomics is now calling on Spanish industry to outline how it can contribute to the development. Three industry days will be held in January in Madrid, Malaga and Bilbao, for companies with experience in a number of sectors including maintenance; sensor data processing, exploitation and dissemination; airborne sensors; supply chain management and UAV research and development.