

PALMDALE-PRODUCED ROBOT SPY CRAFT TO BEGIN REAL OPERATIONS IN U.S.

U.S. to Start Testing New, Larger Global Hawk Model

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PALMDALE - The Palmdale-produced Global Hawk robot spy plane is coming up on a number of firsts, including the start of operations in the United States and the beginning of flight testing of a larger, more capable version.

Known for providing images and intelligence in the War on Terror for the past five years, the program is just beginning operations with the arrival of the first Global Hawk at Beale Air Force Base in Northern California. The aircraft flew a mission from Beale on Tuesday, marking the first time a nontest mission had been flown in the United States.

The Air Force is considering using the aircraft's training flights for other uses, including border patrol, search and rescue, and homeland security missions, said Ed Walby, Northrop Grumman's business development director for high-altitude long-endurance programs.

"There's a world of activities you can participate in," Walby said of U.S. missions. "It's dual use for the flying time."

Prior to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the Global Hawk program was in a technology-demonstration phase in which a handful of aircraft were being built and tested to see whether it would be possible to field a high-altitude, unmanned reconnaissance aircraft. After the attacks, the planes were pressed into service, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq.

Assembled by Northrop Grumman workers in Palmdale, Global Hawk aircraft are capable of flying at an altitude of 65,000 feet, above storms and about six miles higher than jetliners normally fly, for more than 35 hours at a time. During a single mission, Global Hawk's sensors can survey 40,000 square miles.

The Global Hawk aircraft are primarily flown by onboard computers using preprogrammed instructions. The aircraft, however, can be flown by or have a preprogrammed mission adjusted by a ground operator who adjusts the plane's flight through clicks of a computer mouse rather than a joystick.

The aircraft are being developed in "blocks," each progressively more capable than the previous. All seven of the "Block 10" aircraft have been delivered to the military, program officials said.

On Thursday, a Global Hawk aircraft performed the last of the Block 10 evaluation checks, flying a 27-hour mission over Alaska. The flight, which originated at Edwards Air Force Base, involved taking images of 250 targets, including targets obscured by dense forest and ice and snow.

"We believe it performed as advertised," Walby said.

The first of the Block 20 aircraft is about halfway through low-speed taxi tests at U.S. Air Force Plant 42. A first flight will occur either right before the Christmas holiday or in early January.

The aircraft will be able to carry 3,000 pounds of intelligence-gathering equipment, compared with the 2,000 pounds carried by previous Global Hawks. The aircraft will also operate with more than twice the power of its predecessors.

The Block 20 aircraft is also bigger than its predecessors. Its wingspan exceeds 130 feet, compared with 116 feet for earlier models; at 47.5 feet, it is also about 3 feet longer.

The first Block 20 aircraft will go to Edwards for flight testing, which is expected to last about 18 months.

Five other Block 20 aircraft will be produced. Subsequent Global Hawks will all have the same airframe, but the intelligence-gathering capability is expected to improve in future "blocks."

The Air Force plans to buy 54 Global Hawk aircraft. There are several other potential customers, including the U.S. Navy, the Australian military and Germany.

Northrop Grumman plans to propose a derivative of the Global Hawk for the Navy's Board Area Maritime Surveillance program, or BAMS. The program is aimed at having "eyes in the sky" around the clock to watch over areas of the world's oceans of interest to the United States.

"We think it's a perfect fit," Walby said. "At 60,000 feet, you are unencumbered by weather, you have a large view, 300 nautical miles, and you have long endurance. Other systems might boast of less cost, but they have less capability."

The Australian military is following the BAMS program to see if the U.S. system can address its maritime patrol needs.

In December, the German government is expected to decide whether to purchase a variation of the Global Hawk for its needs.