

Boeing boosts tech investment in hybrid, autonomous planes

October 6 2017, by Luc Olinga



Boeing's recent tech-focused investments show it thinks autonomous and hybrid aircraft may not be too far in the future

Boeing is beefing up its investments in autonomous and electric hybrid planes in anticipation that aviation could be primed for as much disruption as virtually every other sector.

The aerospace giant has announced a series of recent tech-focused

investments, unveiling plans Thursday to acquire autonomous aviation company Aurora Flight Sciences Corporation, as well as a stake in Zunum Aero, which works on hybrid electric planes.

Many of the technologies—such as unmanned flying taxis—sound space age, but the latest deals are a sign they may not be as far off as they seem. Boeing did not disclose financial terms for either investment.

"The aerospace industry is going to be changing," Boeing chief technology officer Greg Hyslop said in a conference call with journalists.

The Aurora purchase builds on Boeing's work with the company on commercial and military equipment. Today's commercial airplanes already employ sophisticated computer systems that have automated key aspects of flying.

But Aurora aims to go far beyond that, aspiring to a completely autonomous flight, from take-off to landing. A robot, with the aid of artificial intelligence, could back up a pilot by depressing the pedals, taking control in emergency situations or even landing the plane.

In May, Aurora, collaborating with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, successfully tested its automated co-pilot system on a Boeing commercial plane.

Aurora has also worked to develop a kind of flying taxi system, of keen interest to Boeing in its ongoing rivalry with Airbus.

In April, Aurora was selected by Uber to develop its on-demand urban air transportation system. Aurora's goal of delivering 50 autonomous aircraft for testing by 2020 is "well within reach," the company said at the time.

Airbus for its part is working to develop its flying taxi system Vahana by the end of the year, as well as another concept, Pop UP, that could travel between cities.

Electric planes in 2022

Boeing also is seeking greater exposure to electric hybrid aircraft, a pursuit of Aurora and also of Zunum Aero, a Seattle startup in which Boeing has a stake.

Zunum Aero said Thursday it expects to be able to deliver hybrid electric planes for delivery in 2022.

The [plane](#) aims to address a gap in regional travel of up to 1,000 miles, a segment for which there are few options, high costs and "door-to-door travel times haven't improved in decades," Zunum Aero said in a news release.

The technology could let planes skip big regional airports such as Washington and Boston and instead travel from Beverly, Massachusetts to College Park, Maryland at a lower fare.

The company expects to begin test flights in 2019. Zunum Aero has hired technologists who have worked on leading-edge vehicles for Boeing and Rolls-Royce.

"This aircraft is going to transform how we live and work," said founder and Aero chief engineer Matt Knapp. "We've pushed ourselves to challenge conventional wisdom and the limits of engineering to deliver an aircraft of which we are extremely proud—one that offers efficiency and performance without compromise."

Citation: Boeing boosts tech investment in hybrid, autonomous planes (2017, October 6)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2017-10-boeing-boosts-tech-investment-hybrid.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.