

Three European firms join in robot ship project

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Three European companies are to work on a pioneering project to build a fully-automated supply ship, the French member of the scheme announced on Tuesday.

French offshore services company Bourbon said it had signed up with Automated Ships Ltd. (ASL) of Britain in a scheme with Norway tech firm Kongsberg Maritime to build the first ship of its kind in the world.

It will be "the world's first autonomous, fully-automated and cost-efficient prototype vessel for offshore operations," Bourbon said in a press release.

At present, small unmanned boats are used for nearshore operations, but there are no technical barriers to building larger, unmanned and automated vessels, the participants say.

The goal is to produce a self-drive vessel that can deliver light supplies to the offshore energy and fish-farming industry and provide backup in emergencies. It could also be used as support for scientific and hydrographic missions.

ASL and the Norwegian firm Kongsberg last year worked together to develop an initial design of a catamaran named Hroenn.

This has evolved into a 37-metre (121-foot) monohull, offering greater payload capacity and mission flexibility, Bourbon said.

The prototype would be built in Norway and assessed at a special testbed for automated vessels in Trondheim fjord under the scrutiny of Norway's maritime authorities.

On its website, Kongsberg says Hroenn will initially function as a remotely-piloted ship.

It would eventually transition to a fully-automated

[vessel](#) "as the control algorithms are developed concurrently during remotely piloted operations."

Hroenn is expected to be built by the Norwegian shipyard Fjellstrand AS, which is experienced in building ferries and offshore support vessels that incorporate advanced technology, according to Kongsberg.

Bourbon said that its role in the scheme would be to provide its knowledge of the offshore services industry to help finetune Hroenn's design and costs so that they match market needs. The company operates a fleet of 514 vessels and has a payroll of 9,300.

It would then work with ASL to help muster the finance to build the prototype.

The cost of the prototype was not identified.

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