

## Business / Technology

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### Moses Lake to be test site for Mitsubishi Aircraft regional jet

Japan's Mitsubishi Aircraft will create a flight test center at Moses Lake for its new Mitsubishi Regional Jet (MRJ), bringing dozens of pilots, engineers and technicians to the Central Washington town, the company will announce Monday at the Farnborough Air Show.

By Dominic Gates

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Japan's Mitsubishi Aircraft will create a flight-test center at Moses Lake for its new Mitsubishi Regional Jet (MRJ), bringing dozens of pilots, engineers and technicians to the Central Washington town, the company will announce Monday at the Farnborough Air Show.

Mitsubishi, which is completing Japan's first new commercial passenger aircraft in more than 40 years, was attracted by the long, uncrowded runways at Grant County International Airport and the new-plane expertise available in Washington.

In all, about 100 people in Moses Lake will work on the flight-testing project, Mitsubishi Aircraft

Corporation president Teruaki Kawai said in an interview.

The MRJ, smaller than any of Boeing's jets, will come initially in 92-seat and 78-seat variants. Launched seven years ago, it has experienced considerable program delays and is scheduled to enter service in 2017.

Gov. Jay Inslee, sporting a gold MRJ pin in his lapel, said in an interview on the sidelines of Washington state's pre-Farnborough reception Sunday that the project "sets up an infrastructure for airplane certification and testing that may lead to bigger and better things. The infrastructure could be available to other companies over time."

Some 50 to 60 Japanese engineers and technicians will be based in Moses Lake for at least a year, Kawai said. A smaller number will stay for three or more years as follow-on variants of the MRJ are tested,

Seattle-based AeroTEC, a small engineering company that provides flight-testing and aircraft certification services, will provide technical support for Mitsubishi, according to a letter of intent signed by the Japanese company.

AeroTEC president Lee Human said his company will hire about 20 engineers and technicians for its part in the flight tests.

It will also build a new 65,000-square-foot hangar at the airfield in Moses Lake, Human said.

Initially that will house three flight-test MRJs, but he said it will be sized for potential future work "to accommodate every Boeing airplane, including the upcoming 777-9X."

Kawai said initial flights of the airplane will begin next spring in Japan. Then, in fall 2015, the majority of the testing will shift to Moses Lake. Three test aircraft will be based there, two in Japan.

Kawai said his company chose to come to the U.S. because the air space in Japan is congested and there are few long runways available for testing purposes.

Grant County International Airport, an Air Force base until 1966, will offer ideal flight-test conditions: runways up to 13,500 feet long, the newly built hangar, little competing air traffic and clear weather.

The expertise offered by AeroTEC is also part of the draw.

“The reason we had delays for this program is that we didn’t have any experience in how to get certification,” said Kawai. In Washington state, “there are a lot of experienced people.”

The MRJ flight-test program will renew a longstanding cultural link between Moses Lake and Japan.

For 40 years until 2008, Japan Airlines (JAL) used the airfield as a base to train pilots to fly its 747-400s, the last of which JAL retired in 2011.

Over the decades, more than 10,000 JAL crew members were based there for short periods of training.

Boeing also conducts frequent flight tests of its much bigger jets out of Moses Lake.

Once largely rural, Moses Lake is growing rapidly as a center of heavy industry and high-tech manufacturing.

German firms SGL and BMW have just announced an expansion of their carbon-fiber plant there that by next year will make it the largest in the world, employing about 200 people.

The town is also home to REC Silicon, which makes silicon for solar panels and employs about 500 people.

The largest employer is Genie Industries, which makes aerial work platforms and employs 1,350 people.

Patrick Jones, executive director of the Port of Moses Lake, said having Mitsubishi join ATS, the aircraft-modification company, at the Grant County International Airport “is going to be another jump forward in our ability to support large-scale aviation services.”

Jones said the hangar construction is mostly funded by private money from AeroTEC.

Inslee said the state also provided “some strategic reserve funds” for infrastructure to help make the Mitsubishi project come together.

“Relatively small investments by the state, but they are really going to pay off,” he said.

The state’s pre-air show reception Sunday afternoon was at the Shangri-La hotel in the Shard, a modernist skyscraper in central London.

The venue on the 34th floor offered stunning views of the river Thames, Tower Bridge and a wide vista of central London.

It was more impressive by far than the locations of state receptions at previous air shows.

The Washington Aerospace Partnership, a collaboration of state business, labor and government leaders co-sponsored the reception with HSBC, a British bank involved in trade between the U.K. and the state.

Alex Pietsch, director of the governor’s aerospace office, said the aerospace partnership “felt that the 777X was a tremendous win for the state, and to celebrate that and to celebrate the Washington aerospace industry here in London on the eve of the air show, that this was a fitting venue.”

Inslee’s trip was funded by the fees paid by the 40-strong delegation. “I’m not here on the public dime,” the governor said.

At this week's show, Inslee will meet with a selection of top aerospace executives, including Boeing CEO Jim McNerney and Airbus Americas Chairman Allan McArtor.

He'll also meet with Fred Hochberg, chairman of the U.S. Export-Import Bank, and will be one of 31 governors signing a letter asking Congress to reauthorize the bank.

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