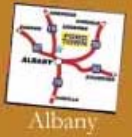




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Updated: 8:21 PM Nov 21, 2009

Thrush introduces next generation of ag aircraft

An Albany agricultural airplane manufacturer is one of only two such facilities in the world. - Carlton Fletcher, metro editor

Posted: 9:00 PM Nov 21, 2009

Reporter: Carlton Fletcher, metro editot

Email Address: carlton.fletcher@albanyherald.com



Mechanic Jason Glausier prepares an ag aircraft, fitted with the GE H80 turboprop engine, for ferrying to South America at the Thrush Aircraft Inc. plant in Albany.

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ALBANY — While Thrush Aircraft Inc. has long held the reputation as one of Southwest Georgia's best-kept — and best — business secrets, the manufacturer of agricultural aircraft may soon find it a little more difficult to maintain its relative anonymity outside its area of expertise.

Thrush is exclusively teaming with General Electric, the world's largest manufacturer of aircraft engines, to produce the new generation Thrush 510, the most dramatic innovation in aviation aircraft since the introduction of the turbine engine in the industry some three decades ago.

The lighter, faster, stronger Thrush 510, which will carry a much larger, 510-gallon payload, will utilize the GE Aviation-produced H80 turboprop engine, which delivers more shaft horsepower, improved fuel efficiency and increased temperature margin, which significantly enhance hot-day takeoff performance and high-altitude cruise speeds. "We selected the H80 engine based on GE's strong reputation for engine performance and reliability, which are critical for our customers," said Jody Bays, Thrush's vice president for flight test and product support. "The additional horsepower and increased temperature margin of the H80 engine will enable Thrush 510 operators to carry larger loads in hot weather."

Certification for the H80 engine is expected early in 2010.

"This selection by Thrush marks the first application for our new H80 engine," said Brad Mottier, GE Aviation's vice president and general manager, in a joint announcement. "We look forward to working with Thrush and its customers and providing them a powerful, fuel-efficient and durable turboprop engine to meet their needs."

Thrush's 72-person staff worked through this past week to put the finishing touches on modifications to its new 510 aircraft that allowed for the installation of the GE H80 engine. Jody Bays will put the new craft through its paces with test flights before the Albany aircraft manufacturer starts taking orders for the innovative plane as soon as next month.

"I've loved GE engines for years," Bays, the brother of Thrush President Larry Bays, said. "Their engine is in Air Force One, and their engine was in the Apache helicopters I flew as a military pilot."

"We called the guy who worked on those engines the 'Maytag repairman' because he never had to do anything. Those engines didn't break."

Larry Bays bought Thrush Aircraft, one of only two producers of agricultural aircraft in the world, in 2003. He'd been associated with the company through his accounting firm since 1977.

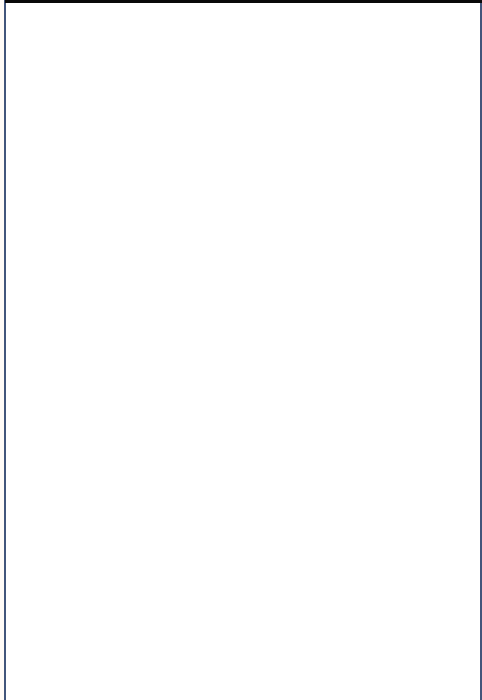
Jody Bays, who'd been a civilian contract pilot at Fort Rucker in Alabama since retiring from the military, came on board in 2004, and together they've honed the manufacturing capability of the Thrush plant to an exact science.

The company produces 36 aircraft to exact specifications each year, working efficiently to keep up with a demand that is worldwide.

"Our No. 1 customers are banana growers," Thrush Vice President Eric Rojek said. "Around two-thirds of our planes are in Ecuador, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Honduras."

But that doesn't mean there is no call for the craft, most often utilized as cropdusters, in the U.S.

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1. Thrush introduces next generation of ag

"You may not see the cropdusters at work in our area, but they're here," Larry Bays said. "I'd say there are between 30 and 40 of them in use in a 50-mile radius of Albany. Sure, they're well-suited for areas like the Mississippi Delta, but they're perfect for Georgia's small fields, too."

Aerial application of products used to protect and fertilize crops has proven to be the safest, fastest, most efficient and economical method of application utilized in agribusiness today. Thrush, which has aircraft operating in 80 countries, produces 510, 550 and 660 models noted for superb visibility, light control response and high degrees of maneuverability and speed.

The staff at Thrush's Albany plant has been cross-trained to efficiently assemble aircraft that are also utilized in fighting forest fires, law enforcement surveillance, border patrol duty and food distribution.

"We have a staff of 72 full-time employees now," Rojek said. "That's down from a high of 154. But through cross-training and working smart, we're able to build more airplanes with 72 workers than we ever did with 154."

The introduction of the GE H80 turboprop engine into the Thrush 510 may not have the impact on the general public that say a hybrid automobile engine might have, but Thrush officials say the promise of 50 more horsepower in a plane whose weight has been trimmed by 6-8 percent is huge news.

"The aircraft engine is old, old technology," Jody Bays said. "We're all flying around now in our grandfathers' engines; there have been few changes in 40 years. Thrush was the first to put a turbine engine in an agricultural aircraft, and now we will be the first to incorporate the turboprop engine into our technology.

"And we have made significant changes to the aircraft. This is not a different engine in the same old airplane. We redesigned it, started over and came up with a new plane."

Larry Bays echoes his brother/business partner's thoughts.

"I doubt you'll see another new generation of agricultural aircraft produced in this country in your lifetime," he said.

After Jody Bays finishes his test flights and the Thrush crew fine tunes the new 510's modifications, the latest generation of agriculture aircraft will hit the market.

"The market for agriculture aircraft is constantly evolving," Larry Bays said. "There's a developing market in Kazakhstan, in Niger, in Kuwait. Because of the sheer economics of this airplane, I think it's going to be a hit.

"I see it having a big impact domestically, and I think it's going to sell well overseas, too."

So much for well-kept secrets.

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