

Autonomous robo taxi takes to the skies

By TOM BANSE
Northwest News Network

A drone air taxi designed by Airbus has successfully completed 114 test flights in Pacific Northwest skies. Airbus, along with its rival Boeing and many others, is striving to make flying cars an option for your urban commute. The enthusiasm around the test flight hangar in Pendleton has to be leavened, though. Industry insiders said the technology is running years ahead of regulators and public acceptance.

You can imagine living life like “The Jetsons” cartoon family when you stand next to Airbus’ electric, single-seat passenger drone.

“It’s cool and it’s real,” said the head of flight testing, Matt Deal, as curious attendees from a regional drone industry conference admired the futuristic prototype in a hangar at the Pendleton airport.

“No crashes, no nothing. It’s been great so far,” Deal said. “Over 100 takeoffs and landings, all self-piloted. So there is no pilot either on the ground or in the vehicle. From the very beginning, we were all autonomous.”

Flight testing continues in the skies of the Pendleton Unmanned Aerial Systems Test Range.

Airbus named the eight-rotor prototype “Vahana,” an allusion to Hindu mythology and flying carpets. The goal is to offer a faster option for short hops across highly congested big cities – or from suburbs to city centers – at a cost that is competitive with ground taxi fare over the same distance.

Deal said the prototype has a range of around 31 miles or about 20 minutes of flight time with fully charged batteries. He said the battery pack makes up almost 40% of the weight of



The self-flying Vahana air taxi has completed 114 flight tests at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport in Pendleton.



The Boeing Passenger Air Vehicle made its first flight at Manassas Regional Airport in Virginia on Jan. 22.

the vehicle.

“Vahana was intended to be a technology demonstrator,” Deal said. “So from the very beginning we just wanted to prove the viability of technology and we’ve done that. From vertical takeoff, through transition, to a cruise speed of over 100 miles per hour, we’ve demonstrated electrification in aviation is not only feasible, it’s feasible now.”

There was no human on board for any of Vahana’s flights. In Europe, the

company is flight-testing a larger robo-air taxi dubbed CityAirbus. The learnings from both aircraft development programs will be combined into the next iteration. Deal said Airbus is proceeding methodically amid lots of competition worldwide.

For its part, Boeing is testing a two-seat robo-air taxi developed by its Aurora Flight Sciences subsidiary. The Boeing electric vertical-takeoff-and-landing prototype made its maiden flight in January. It crashed

onto a runway in June while flying unmanned at the Manassas, Virginia, airport, suffering substantial damage but causing no injuries to people, according to a preliminary report from the National Transportation Safety Board.

A leading Chinese competitor, Ehang, recently announced it has completed numerous demonstration flights carrying passengers in its two-seat electric flying car.

So, when will you and

I get to soar over traffic in a flying Uber that we’ve hailed with a mobile app? That’s still hard to say.

Last week, Pendleton High School students looked over the Airbus drone taxi and pronounced themselves ready to try it out.

“I’d be fine flying in a drone,” sophomore Dylan McKenzie said. “I think it would be an amazing experience.”

“I have enough confidence in the technology that they have put into this and the amount of development they have going into this machine that I trust them,” added fellow student Tripp Sorenson.

Consultant Renee Fellman of Portland was more cautious about boarding a pilotless air taxi.

“I love technology,” Fellman said. “I use technology, but there are too many glitches. Until I am sure, whether it is autonomous cars or autonomous air vehicles, I’m not personally getting in.”

Public acceptance and

perceptions of safety are among many remaining hurdles, University of Washington researcher Don MacKenzie said. The engineering professor is currently studying why most people remain wary of autonomous vehicles.

“Our research on road vehicle automation suggests that people are not necessarily ready,” MacKenzie said. “At least the average person is not necessarily ready to trust this technology and go all-in on it today based on what they know today.”

MacKenzie said we have passed “the peak of inflated expectations” and now more realism and grounded expectations prevail.

The Federal Aviation Administration still needs to define how it will certify this new class of passenger-carrying aircraft. Separately, governments and aircraft makers are pouring millions of dollars into air traffic control studies. One of those trials will unfold over the inland Northwest soon, in partnership with defense contractor PAE ISR.

The Airbus Vahana team is beginning to research noise from robo-air taxis – yet another issue with more questions than answers.

Civic leaders in Pendleton have embraced the drone test range at the city-owned airport. Airbus and PAE ISR are probably the highest-profile tenants among a variety of global aerospace companies that have leased all of the available hangar space around the airfield.

The organizers of the Association of Unmanned Vehicles Systems International drone symposium held in Pendleton in early October enhanced the catchphrase of the city’s signature rodeo to capture the new industry cluster.

“Where Let’s Fly! Buck meets Let’s Fly!” the revised slogan read.

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Ten myths about climate change

Are extreme weather events getting more extreme? Do we have 11 years before the window to “solve” climate change closes forever? Is it all just natural variability, with humans playing at most a bit part? And what about the Blob?

Scientists began studying climate change over 100 years ago, and have uncovered many fascinating secrets about the Earth’s complex climate system. As heat-trapping gases accumulate, understanding and predicting the behavior of this complex system becomes ever more important, and often the science (sometimes very well-established, sometimes fresh and untested) plays out in the public sphere as never before. Come hear the state of the science of climate change, from the global scale to the Astoria area, from someone who has studied the subject for over 20 years. And bring your own questions.

Philip Mote is vice provost and dean of the Graduate School and remains active in the Oregon Climate Change Research Institute (OCCRI) and the NOAA-funded Climate Impacts Research Consortium (CIRC) for the Northwest. He is very active in leadership of the 60,000-member American Geophysical Union, as President of Global Environmental Change, member of the Council, Vice Chair of the Council Leadership Team, and a member of the Board.

Philip was the founding director (2009-19) of OCCRI and remains involved in communicating climate science within Oregon.

He earned a B.A. in Physics from Harvard University and a Ph.D. in Atmospheric Sciences from the University of Washington.

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