Fiat Chrysler Automobiles gets into air taxi business with Silicon Valley's Archer

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Credit: Archer

Fiat Chrysler Automobiles, known for its love of heavy-duty horsepower in its Hemis and Hellcats, is partnering with a Silicon Valley air taxi start-up with plans to produce electric aircraft in 2023.

FCA, whose brands include Jeep, Ram, Dodge, Chrysler, Fiat, Alfa Romeo and Maserati, has already collaborated with Palo Alto, California-based Archer on cockpit design, which the companies expect to unveil later this year, according to a news release Tuesday. The deal will allow Archer "to benefit from access to FCA's low-cost supply chain, advanced composite materials capabilities and engineering and design experience."

Archer is to build high-volume, composite electric vertical takeoff and landing aircraft, known as eVTOL, the release said.

"While we are not sharing specific details around our production plans and location at this time, our goal is to start volume manufacturing in 2023 and conduct the first consumer flights in 2024," according to Louise Bristow, a spokesperson for Archer.

Financial terms of the deal were not provided, with Bristow noting Archer is privately owned. FCA is expected to complete its merger with Peugeot maker PSA Group to form Stellantis on Saturday. Bristow said the merger would not affect the partnership directly, but FCA's supply chain and other capabilities could benefit from collaboration with PSA.

FCA is leaping into an area where numerous companies, such as Uber and General Motors, have seen potential. In a 2019 research paper, Morgan Stanley referenced "a total addressable market of $1.5 trillion for autonomous aircraft by 2040."

Many of the proposals for this type of air travel have focused on the use of autonomous flying technology.

For the time being, Archer's aircraft will not be autonomous, although autonomous options are being explored, Bristow said. Instead, the aircraft will carry a pilot and four passengers.

Bristow said the focus would be on passenger transport, as opposed to hauling cargo or making deliveries.

Archer's aircraft will be able to travel 60 miles at up to 150 mph, according to the news release. Archer's website said that range is possible using current commercially available battery technology.

The aircraft will "take off vertically like a helicopter, fly forward like an airplane, and will be 100% electric. There is no runway required and the vehicles can land vertically on a traditional helicopter landing pad or retrofitted landing site," the website said.

Questions remain, of course, about how quickly technology often identified with science fiction is truly likely to be in wide use. Regulations and control infrastructure are some of the areas of uncertainty.

Archer cofounders Brett Adcock and Adam Goldstein said in a posting that they intend to keep costs to fly affordable.

"Our goal is to make our service is affordable for the masses. This means driving operating costs down to the price of ride sharing and over time to the cost of car ownership," they said.

They also said they intend to make the aircraft as safe as commercial airliners and keep the "flyover noise at or below equivalent sound levels of residential neighborhoods."

Goldstein, in the release, touted the potential for mass electric air travel to transform transportation.

"This is a first-of-its-kind deal for one of Detroit's Big Three automakers in moving into the urban air mobility space. There is now a clear path for Archer to bring mass production to this industry, changing the way people travel in and around cities forever," Goldstein said.

Doug Ostermann, vice president and head of global business development of FCA, mentioned the mutual benefits of the partnership.

"Electrification within the transportation sector whether on roads or in

the air is the future and with any new and rapidly developing technology, scale is important. Our partnership with Archer has mutual benefits and will enable innovative, environmentally friendly transportation solutions to be brought to market at an accelerated pace," Ostermann said in the release.

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