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SA companies to produce key components for Europe's latest widebody airliner

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Airliner manufacturing giant Airbus on Monday announced that two South African companies had been awarded contracts to produce parts and subsystems for the European company's latest design, the A350 XWB. The two companies concerned are both private sector enterprises, Aerosud and Cobham Omnipless.

The contracts for Aerosud were awarded by Airbus partner group Spirit Aerosystems while that for Cobham Omnipless was placed by another Airbus partner company, Rockwell of the US.

Aerosud has been awarded two contracts. In terms of the first, the South African company will manufacture Track Cans for the A350 XWB. Track Cans house the actuators for the wing flaps, and those made by Aerosud will be fitted to the fixed leading edge of the wings, with 11 Track Cans per wing or 22 per aircraft. Aerosud, which is based in Centurion, south of Pretoria, has manufactured Track Cans for the Airbus family of single-aisle airliners for more than four years.

The second contract will see Aerosud produce Frame Clips for the A350 XWB. Frame Clips will join all major primary structure components such as frames, stringers and the skin – for example, Frame Clips will hold the carbon composite fuselage skin panels to the fuselage skeleton. They are thus critically important components.

The Frame Clips will be made from new generation composites, Continuous Fibre Reinforced Thermoplastics (CFRTs). CFRTs consist of woven or unidirectional fibre reinforcement, which could be carbon, glass or aramid, which is embedded into a thermoplastic polymer matrix.

To manufacture the Frame Clips, Aerosud will not only have to set up a new production facility, but will also have to introduce new production techniques. The local company will have to design and build a thermoform press, using heated press tool technology, and with final part shape trimming.

Aerosud has been a supplier to Airbus since 2004 and is also involved in the A400M military transport and air-to-air refuelling aircraft programme.

Cobham Omnipless, of Cape Town, has been contracted to design, develop and manufacture satellite communications systems for the A350 XWB. The systems are each composed of a mounting plate, an antenna and an amplifier. The company also produces satellite communications systems for all other Airbus aircraft, except the A380.

The total value of work placed by Airbus in South Africa since the start of the process is some R4-billion, including about R500-million of work on the A400M and A350 XWB.

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