
Proposed F-35 cuts could hit Marietta

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WASHINGTON -- As Congress eyes Pentagon cuts to help bring down deficits, the multibillion dollar F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program is in the crosshairs -- which could mean more belt-tightening at Lockheed Martin's Marietta plant.

Republicans who represent the area, though zealous about budget cutting overall, are lobbying against a Senate plan to hold F-35 production at current levels rather than increase it by three planes next year. The proposal, which would cut \$695 million from the Pentagon's \$9.7 billion program request, must be merged with a House-passed bill that granted the full amount.

"We're going to fight very hard to hold the line on that," said Rep. Phil Gingrey, R-Marietta.

But the Senate proposal, which moved from committee with bipartisan support, is seen as a bellwether.

Sen. Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., said as the proposals are merged he hopes for "a resolution on this or at least a firm game plan established on the F-35 among the appropriators. Whether we'll see any of it restored or not I don't know. Obviously I hope so."

Last month Gingrey and Chambliss both toured the Marietta plant, which produces the center wing portion of the F-35, nicknamed the Lightning II. It shipped the first center wing to another Lockheed plant in Fort Worth, Texas, for final assembly last week.

Lockheed officials say the 300 F-35 jobs now on the Marietta production line could increase to 1,000 around 2015 when the project hits peak production and the plant produces one center wing each day. The work has helped cushion the blow of the early shutdown the F-22 program, based in Marietta.

But that timetable would be slowed under the Senate's proposed cut.

Lockheed spokesman Johnny Whitaker declined to comment on the effect on the Marietta plant, saying the company "recognizes that there are difficult challenges in preparing this budget, and we will continue to partner with our customers to ensure that we deliver affordable solutions that support our national and economic security initiatives."

The possible F-35 freeze comes amid companywide cutbacks at Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Company, which expects to shed 1,500 positions by year's end, mostly in middle management. Marietta is one of three main locations affected.

Demming Bass of the Cobb County Chamber of Commerce flew to Washington last week with area business leaders to lobby lawmakers and others to keep the F-35 program on track.

"One of the things that we're stressing is in this time of high unemployment right now we need more defense jobs not fewer," Bass said.

That argument irks the Cato Institute's Christopher Preble.

"If we believe defense is a public good, then the jobs provided to a tiny, tiny, tiny subset should be irrelevant," said Preble, vice president of defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian think tank.

“And the moment somebody brings up that argument for me it’s a warning signal. It’s a red light on my dashboard saying maybe this thing isn’t as important as they say it is for national security. Maybe it’s just a jobs program. If that’s the case then there should be millions of people who are offended by that.”

The Pentagon’s largest procurement project, the F-35 has been plagued by delays and cost overruns since Lockheed won the bid in 2001. The Pentagon restructured the program early this year to slow development, but a still unresolved fight over the costs of an alternate engine has somewhat unfairly made the project into a symbol of defense largesse, said Travis Sharp, of the Center for a New American Security.

Sharp said slowing or scaling back the program could cause allies to drop out and put the entire program at risk. Australia, Canada, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Turkey and the United Kingdom are participating in the design and test phases.

Sharp said one can argue that a next-generation stealth fighter like the F-35 is not as important to the future of the Air Force as unmanned drones, but the current troubles have more to do with price tags than anything.

“The risks to the program purely have to do with the budget cuts,” Sharp said. “If you look around in Washington right now, there’s nobody talking about strategy. There’s nobody talking about future threats. . . If you reduce the F-35 program, you are accepting national security risk. That’s the bottom line.”

Senate appropriators argue that buying fewer airplanes now is an efficiency decision that makes sense because testing is only 10 percent complete. Although buying more makes them cheaper per-plane, Senate Appropriations Chairman Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, argues it will cost more to modify planes later based on problems identified in testing.

In a report accompanying the defense budget, Senate staffers included an ominous note: “If the Joint Strike Fighter continues on the same path and its costs are not brought under control, the Committee believes that the program’s future could be in jeopardy.”

Chambliss, for parochial and national security reasons, said he is trying to make sure that is not the case. A member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Chambliss said the scaling back of the F-22 fighter program makes the F-35 even more crucial to replacing decades-old planes and justifies producing aircraft even when the project is still in the test phase. Congress halted funding for F-22 in 2009 in part to fund the smaller, cheaper and newer F-35.

“I am one who thinks we’ve got to trim expenses at the Pentagon,” Chambliss said. “I think weapons systems have to be on the table just like everything else. But by the same token, when you look at the weapons systems, we need to maintain air systems and air superiority ... there is no alternative to the F-35.”

Chambliss and Gingrey both said they are confident Lockheed can limit job losses if the program is slowed, as it did by moving F-22 employees to other production lines, and they stressed military readiness concerns more than job losses. But F-35’s importance to Marietta is a big motivator.

“As the budget situation gets worse, it becomes a fine line to walk to say we’ve got to cut this spending, but not this spending over here,” said Kerwin Swint, a political science professor at Kennesaw State University.

“[But] they think it’s part of a political necessity to try to protect these defense dollars and jobs.”