

This Week in Washington



WITH CONGRESSMAN
JO BONNER

Re-bid Announced for Tanker Contract

In yet another chapter of the story of the Air Force's mission for a new fleet of aerial refueling tankers, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates last week announced an expedited re-competition of the tanker contract.

This new, abbreviated competition will be much shorter than the original competition with an award expected to be announced by the end of the year. The U.S. Air Force contract includes 179 tankers to be delivered over 15 years.

While many in Alabama may be wondering whether or not this is good news, let me assure you it absolutely is good news.

As we all know, on February 29, the U.S. Air Force chose the Northrop Grumman/EADS team

to build the next generation refueling tanker.

A few days later, Boeing announced it was formally protesting the U.S. Air Force's decision to award the tanker contract to the Northrop Grumman team.

The protest was filed with the Government Accountability Office (GAO), which serves as the impartial arbiter of all protests of Department of Defense (DoD) contract awards. The GAO had 100 days to issue a decision, and last month, GAO sustained Boeing's protest.

Out of 111 different complaints filed by Boeing, the GAO dismissed 104, determining that eight of the complaints were significant enough to warrant a review of the contract award.

In light of GAO's announcement, Secretary Gates made the decision that will – in the shortest amount of time – provide our military men and women with the tanker they so desperately need.

I think it is critical that we in Congress, on both sides of this issue, listen very carefully to what the secretary of defense said about the urgent need to get on with the tanker program.

Remember, the Air Force started the tanker replacement program in 2001 – and to date, our airmen have nothing to show for it. Now they are left to support two wars with tankers approaching 50 years old. We simply must move forward with the great urgency this program demands.

The average age of this Eisenhower-era fleet of tankers is 47 years old. In fact, many have been flying longer than I have been alive.

I am pleased the secretary is taking over this procurement – putting the full weight, expertise and credibility of his office behind the program. It deserves this level of attention – it is that important.

Some of my colleagues wanted to start this competition over from square one. The urgency of the need simply does not allow time for that to happen.

I believe Secretary Gates' plan for an expedited re-competition will allow the concerns of the GAO to be addressed and determine an acceptable contract in order to get on with building

tankers.

Instead of starting the process over, the secretary is going to concentrate on the eight areas that GAO highlighted as areas of concern, answer those questions, and bring both Boeing and Northrop Grumman back to the table.

At the end of the day, this program is not about jobs in the Northwest or jobs on the Gulf Coast – it's about getting the best equipment into the hands of the men and women of our military as quickly as possible.

The Northrop Grumman plane was judged the best equipment in round one – I have every confidence it will remain the top choice after the GAO procedural concerns are resolved.

The KC-45A tanker offers the warfighter more fuel to offload for combat aircraft, the capacity to carry more patients in aero-medical missions and disaster relief efforts, more passengers, more cargo, more availability, more flexibility, and more dependability – all at a better value to the American taxpayer.

It is simply a more modern, more capable aircraft that can be delivered to our military sooner. I am confident an expedited re-competition will reaffirm this decision.

I compliment Secretary Gates for his bold action in defining a way forward for this critical program.

Come December, I am hopeful south Alabama will get a great Christmas present.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.

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