

Lockheed fighter program hits more turbulence

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Reuters

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon overhauled the Lockheed Martin Corp. F-35 fighter program for the second time in a year and said it would

buy 41 Boeing Co F/A-18 warplanes over the next three years to offset slower production of the Lockheed plane.

Defence Secretary Robert Gates said Thursday a further restructuring of the F-35 as part of a broad cost-saving

plan. The Pentagon's biggest arms program, the new fighter is being developed with eight international partner countries. Gates said the Marine Corps. variant of the plane, which offers short takeoff and vertical landing capabilities,

was effectively put on a two-year "probation," and could still be cancelled if Lockheed was unable to fix its test problems.

"If we cannot fix this variant during this time frame and get it back on track in terms of

performance, cost and schedule, then I believe it should be cancelled," Gates said.

He said slowing production of the new, radar-evading F-35 would save US\$4 billion in the next five years, part of a massive package of cost-savings

adopted by the Pentagon to stave off bigger budget cuts.

A Pentagon document explaining the changes said \$4.6 billion would be shifted into the program's development phase to pay for more testing.

U.S. puts F-35 fighter model on two-year 'probation'

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OTTAWA

The U.S. government announced Thursday that the development of the model of the F-35 fighter jet ordered by the Marine Corps will be put on a two-year "probation" due to "significant testing problems" and will be cancelled if it cannot be fixed.

The aircraft in question differs from the one the Conservative government committed to buying this summer for a record \$16 billion, a figure critics say combines the \$9 billion purchase price with estimated maintenance costs. Critics also claim the contract was awarded without competition, something the Conservatives have denied.

But U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates acknowledged problems with the overall

progress of the Joint Strike Fighter Program — which the Canadian government said will replace its aging fleet of CF-18s — during a briefing at the Pentagon to explain a series of cuts in military spending that will save the U.S. government an estimated \$100 billion over five years.

"The Joint Strike Fighter program received special scrutiny, given its substantial cost, ongoing development issues, and its central place in the future of U.S. military aviation," said Gates.

While he said that two of the three JSF aircraft — to be built by the U.S. firm Lockheed Martin — are "proceeding satisfactorily," the Marine Corps version has been put on hold for two years.

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ule, then I believe it should be cancelled," said Gates.

Officials at Canada's Department of National Defence said that problems with the Marines' fighter jet have nothing to do with the one Canada will buy.

"I say without hesitation... this is the only aircraft for the future," said Maj.-Gen. Tom Lawson, the assistant chief of Canada's air staff.

The government committed to buying the air force version of the F-35, the CTOL (conventional take off landing), which is "much the same as fighters that Canada has flown in its history," and makes up the majority of the estimated 3,000 jets to be built for allied air forces around the globe, Lawson said.

The marine variant, the STOVL (short-take off vertical landing) allows an aircraft to land vertically. That

requires the movement of large engine parts and has represented the bulk of additional costs and delays associated with the JSF, said Lawson.

There is another version for the U.S. navy.

Andre Fillion, director-general of major project delivery (air) at the Defence Department, said he doesn't anticipate any delays in the delivery of F-35s to Canada, which is set to begin in 2016 and end in 2022.

Opposition members said that Gates' announcement shows how troubled the JSF program is.

Liberal MP Marc Garneau said it bolsters the Liberal call for the deal to be cancelled and for a new tendering process to take place — this time with competition.

"You can say that there's nothing new here that affects Canada. But all of the con-

cerns that we've expressed in the past continue to exist. And I, from my point of view, feel that we're not out of the woods with the development of this aircraft," said Garneau, his party's industry critic.

"We should be only looking at an aircraft that is certified, developed, and for which we have a firm cost and a delivery. And that's obviously not the case today," he said.

NDP MP Jack Harris, national defence critic, said he doesn't believe that problems associated with the JSF aircraft will go away now that the Marine version is under special scrutiny.

"It indicates that the program itself has significant flaws," he said.

"When Toyota recalled the Camry, they said there was only one car that had a problem. Then all of sudden they're recalling all sorts of other cars too."

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