

Action in Congress

By Megan Scully

The Air Force's Fiscal 2016 budget request would add more than 100 new aircraft to the fleet, boost the service's capabilities in space and other areas, and improve readiness rates. But with the Defense Department's budget exceeding mandated caps on spending by \$35 billion, it is unclear how much of the Air Force's proposal will actually become reality.

The request provides a starting point for the congressional defense committees, which will soon get to work in earnest on the 2016 budget, essentially weighing the Air Force's priorities against its own and attempting to squeeze as much as possible into the constrained budget.

Congress has numerous tools at its disposal to stretch the department's dollars, including tapping unused money from prior years and shifting programs from the base budget to the unconstrained war accounts. They can—and do—make cuts to hundreds of programs across the Pentagon's massive budget, essentially lessening the pain by spreading it across the department.

It is, to be sure, a tedious job. But it can be effective. In the Fiscal 2015 spending bill, appropriators managed to find \$14 billion in savings across the department—and half of that did not involve cuts to individual programs, according to an analysis conducted by the Congressional Research Service.

All of this bodes well for the Air Force as it attempts to sell its ambitious requests on Capitol Hill, even if the topline for next year remains uncertain. The Air Force's budget totals \$122.2 billion, or 23 percent of the department's entire spending request.

The majority of the service's request—\$77 billion—supports day-to-

day operations, including military and civilian pay, flying hours, weapons system sustainment, and facility requirements and installation support.

But it is the smaller procurement and research and development accounts that will likely draw the most attention on Capitol Hill in the coming months.

The Air Force proposal includes funding for 112 new aircraft—40 more than last year. Those include 44 F-35 strike fighters, 12 KC-46A aerial refueling tankers, eight MC-130J special operations tanker aircraft, 29 MQ-9A remotely piloted aircraft, five HC-130J personnel recovery aircraft, and 14 C-130J cargo airplanes.

The request also includes funding for five Evolved Expendable Launch Vehicles and one GPS III satellite. Meanwhile, ammunition procurement nearly triples, rising from 660 last year to 1,759 in the 2016 request.

In terms of research and development programs, the long-range bomber would receive \$1.2 billion. The combat rescue helicopter would receive \$156 million in R&D funds, with the goal of initial operational capability for the fleet in 2021.

"The FY16 [presidential budget] request can start the recovery for the Air Force we need, an Air Force that supports the defense strategy and provides capabilities combatant commanders need now and in the future," Maj. Gen. James F. Martin, Air Force budget director, told reporters Feb. 2. "But even at PB levels, we still had to make tough choices."

Indeed, the Air Force is preparing to go another round with lawmakers over the retirement of the A-10 Warthog close air support fleet, rejected by Congress last year amid concerns that

the venerable aircraft are needed to protect combat troops on the ground.

The proposal would phase out the A-10 fleet by 2019, with the goal of focusing available resources and manpower on multirole platforms like the F-35 that can perform close air support along with other missions. The Warthog retirements would save \$428 million in Fiscal 2016—and much more over time.

But A-10 supporters on Capitol Hill, including Senate Armed Services Chairman Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), have already said they will battle the Air Force over this proposal again this year, making it seem unlikely—at least at this point—that the service will win this argument.

The Pentagon, meanwhile, is also requesting Congress authorize another base closure and realignment round to begin in 2017. The Air Force, perhaps more than any of the other military services, has said it needs another BRAC to shed unnecessary infrastructure that is inefficient and expensive to maintain.

But lawmakers have repeatedly blasted the department's calls for another BRAC, arguing that the upfront costs of shuttering installations are too great, even if the closures ultimately yield savings.

Several key members, including House Armed Services Chairman Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-Texas), have already rejected the department's calls for another BRAC, likely kicking any possibility of another round of closures into the next presidential Administration. ★

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