

Wishing for More F-35s

Air Force officials want to add back the five F-35As trimmed from the budget request for next year, if Congress can find the money for the stealthy fighters in a constrained budget.

The jets, the price tag for which would total \$691 million, topped the Air Force's Fiscal 2017 unfunded priorities, an annual wish list the military service chiefs send to Capitol Hill as debate on the defense authorization and appropriations bills get underway.

The lists typically serve as a guide—and a justification—for lawmakers who seek to fund pet programs that did not make the Pentagon budget request. The Air Force had been expected to request 48 F-35As for next year, but budget pressures forced service officials to scale purchases in 2017 back to 43.

The bipartisan budget deal in place for Fiscal 2017 leaves the Air Force with about \$3.4 billion less than it had planned on spending next year, a number that service officials say forced them to make difficult choices on premier investment programs.

Some of those decisions, like the cuts to the F-35, are being met with stiff resistance on Capitol Hill.

"We've, of course, detailed the investments that we've made and we've tried to detail the tough choices that we made for budgetary reasons, none of which are popular as you know," Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said March 7 of her discussions with lawmakers on the budget request. "They're not popular with us, either. And that's precisely what makes them tough."

The budget deal, which spanned 2016 and 2017, averted more stringent spending constraints but nonetheless capped the Pentagon's base budget at levels lower than what the military leaders have said the services need to fulfill requirements now and in the future.

But the Defense Department enjoys one perk not afforded to other government agencies: a budgetary overflow valve of sorts in the form of the war spending account, which is not subject to constraints and, as such, has been increasingly used to pay the Pentagon's day-to-day bills.

That could make it a little easier for lawmakers to find funds for priority programs like the F-35, the cuts to which have already sparked criticism on Capitol Hill.

"This budget-driven decision will likely increase the cost of this already costly aircraft, while exacerbating what defense experts call the modernization bow wave for other critical Air Force programs over the next 10 years, which the Air Force admits it cannot afford at current funding levels," Senate

Armed Services Chairman Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) said during a March 3 hearing on the Air Force's budget request.

McCain has been critical of cost overruns, technological problems, and other issues with the F-35 program, but he has largely backed the Lockheed Martin-built fighters, which will replace old Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps fleets. Arizona's Luke AFB is an F-35 training center.

The Air Force, which once famously submitted a 17-page list of unfunded priorities that totaled \$17 billion, kept this year's list short and sweet, likely in an attempt to focus congressional attention on the items the service needs the most.

Aside from the F-35s, the Air Force seeks \$724 million to replace eight more C-130Hs with more modern C-130J aircraft. The Pentagon requested \$1.4 billion for 14 C-130Js and variants next year.

Air Force officials also desire \$88 million to update F-16 fighters to make them more survivable and \$145 million to grow service end strength to 321,000 airmen, up from about 307,000 today. Air Force leaders have long bemoaned the small size of the force, which has 200,000 fewer Active Duty airmen than during the days of Desert Storm.

But the biggest item on the unfunded list is \$1.2 billion for facilities, sustainment, restoration, and modernization accounts, particularly focusing on information technology.

In making their pitch for the 2017 budget proposal on Capitol Hill, Air Force leaders have run head-on into lawmakers not pleased with various puts and takes in the request—a side effect, James says, of the more austere spending environment.

"In periods of rising budgets, and when there is more for programs and more for all parts of the budget, that's just, as a general proposition, an easier sell than when you are in tougher times, when budgets are either leveling off or decreasing," she said during the Pentagon briefing March 7. "Because it's very, very difficult to make these tough choices."

But at least one lawmaker—and Air Force veteran—says he sees the service in hotter water than the Army or Navy as they make their own budget pitches before the congressional defense committees. Fights over the A-10 retirement, which the Air Force has at least shelved for next year, and a Russian-built rocket engine have only made the service's job more difficult.

"It just seems that we fight more with the Air Force than anybody, and I'm in the Air Force, or used to be, anyway," South Carolina Republican Lindsey O. Graham said during the March 3 hearing. ★

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Bring back the missing five F-35s.



USAF photo by MSgt. Donald R. Allen