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Airbus jumps back into tanker plane bid against Pratt-Boeing

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Howard French Journal Inquirer

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Airbus Industrie's corporate parent, European Aeronautic Defense & Space Co., has thrown its hat back into the ring in the competition to supply the next Air Force refueling tanker plane, setting up a replay of the 2009 competition that ended with no decision.

The tanker is designed to refuel military aircraft in flight.

Northrop-Grumman, EADS' partner in the last round, announced in March that it would not bid on the tanker contract because specifications favored a plane built by Boeing.

The Boeing plane, based on its 767 aircraft, uses engines built by East Hartford's Pratt & Whitney.

EADS, is sticking with its aircraft based on its Airbus A330 commercial airliner, which will be powered by General Electric engines.

EADS said Wednesday that it is in discussions with "potential U.S. partners," to replace Northrop-Grumman.

Although the players and the aircraft are nearly identical to the last round of competition, there are some differences, according to Ray Jaworowski, senior aerospace analyst with Newtown-based Forecast International.

"This time around, the Air Force clearly seems to prefer the smaller Boeing 767 over the larger A330 for the tanker mission," Jaworowski said Wednesday.

It's not a question of bias, Jaworowski said. "The service has prioritized certain requirements and specifications that it wants in its future tanker, and these seem to point toward the 767," he said.

EADS might be laying the groundwork for a protest if Boeing is awarded the contract, he said.

As it did last time, EADS said that its tanker would be assembled in Alabama. This ensures some congressional support for the project, Jaworowski said.

"Indeed, both the A330 and the 767 will have their share of supporters in Congress, and the respective influences of the two sides may cancel each other out," he said.

As for a potential U.S. partner, EADS is rumored to be courting New York-based L-3 Corp. and Massachusetts-based Raytheon Co., according to Jaworowski.

Boeing spokesman William Barksdale Wednesday said that his company can produce a tanker that will meet all Air Force requirements at the lowest cost for the taxpayer.

He questioned whether Airbus/ EADS, which is heavily subsidized, can accept "levels of financial risk that a commercial company such as Boeing cannot."

The World Trade Organization has ruled that Europe's Airbus has received billions of dollars in illegal subsidies from the European Union to aid its design and manufacture of large aircraft. The Defense Department has opted not to act on the ruling.

"We regret that these concerns will not be addressed in the bid evaluation," Barksdale said.

, adding that EADS' European subsidies "directly distort competition between Airbus and Boeing."

Boeing will build its new tanker in existing plants in Washington state and Kansas, he said.

Nationwide, the aircraft will benefit about 50,000 jobs, not only at Boeing, but also at 800 suppliers - such as Pratt & Whitney - in more than 40 states, Barksdale said.

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