

Blade in F-35 engine fails test

By Howard French
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Pratt & Whitney is working to correct a problem that led to a fan-blade failure in one of its F135 Joint Strike Fighter engines during static testing, company officials say.

Pratt is the exclusive supplier of engines for the jet, also known as the F-35, which is being developed for use by all divisions of the U.S. military. The Pentagon contract is worth billions of dollars to Pratt.

Matthew C. Bates, communications manager for Pratt's military engines operation, said Thursday that a blade cracked in a developmental engine during longevity tests Dec. 23. The cracked blade resulted in damage to the rotor and front of the engine, he said.

The test engine had the equivalent of nine years of operation, with more than four times the hours of any engine used in F-35 flight test, he said.

Bates said Pratt performs aggressive testing of its developmental engines "to push the hardware at these boundaries so that we can find and fix any issues early and prior to occurrences in flight."

Although Pratt is continuing to investigate the test engine failure, the company has determined it does not pose a flight-safety risk and won't affect F-35s already in operation, he said.

Even before the test failure, Pratt had been working on redesigning the blade to reduce costs, he said.

The changes can be incorporated with "minimal impact" F-35's in operation, Bates said.

In 2013 the Defense Department grounded all F-35s after an engine inspection revealed a crack on a blade in a different section of the engine. The planes, built by Lockheed Martin, were released to resume flight tests a short time later after a Pratt review and Pentagon inspections found the F135 engines airworthy.

Ray Jaworowski, senior aerospace analyst at Newtown's Forecast International, said the latest problem shouldn't be a major setback for the Pratt engine.

"At this point, it does not seem likely to have a big impact on the F-35 program," Jaworowski said. Because Pratt is already redesigning the blade, he said, any changes based on its investigation of the December test failure can be incorporated into the new design.

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