

Sikorsky, Boeing team up for historic copter contest

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Sikorsky Aircraft has partnered with Boeing to try to win the most lucrative military helicopter contract in U.S. history.

On Friday, the two aerospace giants announced they were teaming up for the U.S Army's Joint Multi-Role Technology Demonstrator, a key part of a competition to replace thousands of military helicopters in 2030.

Those seeking to win the contract must fly a new helicopter that can serve as a base model for both transport and attack functions now carried out by Black Hawks, Seahawks, Apache and Chinook helicopters. To move forward in the competition, the team must design and build a new helicopter and get it into the air in 2017.

Despite the partnership, neither company would say whether they would also go after the contract independently or with other partners as the competition unfolds. Both are reportedly working on multiple designs, and Boeing had already partnered with Bell on a potential bid for this contract.

The Pentagon has been authorized to provide \$200 million to two competitors to develop aircraft that will move forward to compete for the contract. The outcome of the contest could drastically affect employment in Connecticut and the future of the U.S. industry, if an analyst noted, the government can sustain funding for the bold program.

"The Sikorsky and Boeing team brings together exceptional technical expertise," said Mick Maurer, president of Sikorsky Aircraft. "Our customer can be assured this collaboration will bring together innovative, industry-leading engineering expertise with a deep bend of program leadership talent, and builds upon the combined resources of both companies to deliver a revolutionary capability for the warfighter at an affordable cost for the U.S. taxpayer."

Shares of United Technologies, Sikorsky's parent company, gained 55 cents to close at \$86.95. Boeing shares finished down 22 cents to \$75.04.

The head of the union representing hourly workers at Sikorsky applauded the move to team up on Friday.

"Winning this program is extremely important to the people on the floor as it will provide for longevity as did the current Black Hawk program," said Rocco Calo, secretary treasurer of Teamsters Local 1150, which represents more 3,500 workers at Sikorsky in Connecticut, Florida and Alabama. In all, Sikorsky employs about 9,000 people in Connecticut. Sikorsky has a five-year, multi-billion-dollar contract to build hundreds of Black Hawks for the U.S. Army.

"The winner of JMR will certainly be the dominant helicopter manufacturer of the U.S." said Raymond Jaworowski, senior aerospace analyst with Newtown-based Forecast International. "Much of their future rides on this program."

That is if the Pentagon gets the money to keep funding its development, he said. With the current budget situation, the program could be cut or pushed back even further than 2030, when the new aircraft are supposed to begin to be delivered.

The impact won't be immediate, he noted. There are several major contracts still out there to win, and Sikorsky is in the thick of the hunt for those, including a nearly \$1 billion presidential helicopter contract and a new Air Force search-and-rescue helicopter. "JMR is very different from other programs," Jaworowski said.

It calls for a completely new helicopter after decades of the U.S. military buying improved versions of aircraft already in their fleet.

Partnering with Boeing makes sense, Jaworowski said.

It will help reduce costs, and he noted Boeing and Sikorsky have worked together before, on the RAH Comanche, which, except for the V-22 hybrid helicopter-airplane developed by Bell and Boeing, was one of the few new helicopter programs the Pentagon has tried to develop in the last two decades.

Comanche was canceled in 2004 on cost concerns.

Both Sikorsky and Boeing officials expressed excitement and confidence in the team's ability to develop an innovative aircraft.

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