

Sikorsky to fly after Marine One contract, again

By Rob Varnon, STAFF WRITER

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The U.S. Navy is once again asking the best helicopter makers in the world to prepare to compete for the U.S. presidential helicopter contract, Marine One.

"We will go after that hard," Paul Jackson, a spokesman for Stratford-based Sikorsky said Friday, confirming the company's dedication to keeping this prestigious contract.

Earlier this week, the Naval Air Systems Command put out a feeler to see what kind of interest there would be in building the next fleet of presidential helicopters. It issued a request for information Wednesday.

Helicopter makers interested in the project by March 3 are asked to submit a five-page proposal answering questions on how much it would cost to produce helicopters and what they would build to meet the Navy's requirements. The Navy said it is looking for information on 23 to 28 helicopters, which is about the size of the last contract that was canceled in 2009. It did not name a price, but instead asked companies to provide cost estimates.

This is the first step in what will be a replay of the 2005 Marine One contract contest in which Sikorsky Aircraft was beaten by the foreign helicopter maker, AgustaWestland, and its U.S. partners, Lockheed Martin and Bell Helicopters.

When Agusta's team won, it was to build 28 helicopters for \$6.5 billion and the first one was scheduled to go into service in 2009. But the contract was pulled last year as costs ballooned to more than \$13 billion as the Navy changed specifications and production goals were missed.

One analyst reviewing the Navy's request for information on a new contract said not much appears to have changed superficially about the Marine One project.

As in 2005, Sikorsky is probably the front-runner, said Raymond Jaworowski, senior aerospace analyst with Forecast International in Newtown.

Sikorsky has held the Marine One contract since 1957. But it's not just that history that's giving the Connecticut helicopter company the edge, according to

Jaworowski.

He said the primary competitor would be Agusta, but giving the contract back to the company that lost it would seem politically unpalatable.

According to the Pentagon, the U.S. is on the hook for about \$55.2 million in 2010 for terminating Agusta's contract.

Besides, Sikorsky has also gained a larger political base in the years since the Marine One loss.

The company now has sizable operations in Pennsylvania, Texas, Alabama and New York, which might give it more clout. Then-U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., backed the Agusta program as it promised to bring hundreds of jobs to New York at the time. Now Sikorsky has a footprint in New York. It opened the Hawk Works in Horseheads, N.Y., in 2007.

Jaworowski said he expects Sikorsky to face competition not only from Agusta, but also from Boeing, Bell and possibly Eurocopter.

"The interesting question is what is Lockheed going to do?" Jaworowski said.

Sikorsky had offered to work with Lockheed on the old contract before it was canceled, Jaworowski



pointed out.

Jackson said Sikorsky has not changed its position on that matter.

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