

Sikorsky faces challenge for presidential helicopter contract

Rob Varnon

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U.S. President Barack Obama salutes as he disembarks the Marine One on the South Lawn of the White House June 3, 2012 in Washington, DC. Sikorsky, which makes the helicopter shown, faces a new challenge for the government contract from AgustaWestland. Photo: Pool, Getty Images / 2012 Getty Images

The competition to land the next presidential helicopter deal is heating up again as Italy-based [AgustaWestland](#) announced Tuesday it has a new partner to compete against Sikorsky Aircraft for the high-profile contract.

In the wake of recent [U.S. Navy](#) statements that the contract to replace the presidential fleet is again a priority, AgustaWestland said it will join Virginia-based Northrop Grumman in its effort to obtain the contract.

In an announcement, the two companies also said they are teaming up to contend for the more lucrative, 112 aircraft Air Force combat rescue helicopter contract.

"We are delighted to have Northrop Grumman as a partner, with their impressive history of supporting the U.S. [Department of Defense](#)," said [Bruno Spagnolini](#), chief executive officer of AgustaWestland. "We strongly believe that the AW101 is the right aircraft for both missions and that this team can succeed."

[Frans Jurgens](#), a Sikorsky spokesman, said the company is waiting for more direction from the Navy on its acquisition strategy.

"We and our principal teammate [Lockheed Martin](#), plan to offer the Sikorsky S-92 helicopter to fly the president of the United States," he said. "The aircraft is used for head-of-state transport in a dozen countries worldwide. Since 2004, Sikorsky has sold more than 150 S-92 aircraft. Besides head-of-state transport, the aircraft is used extensively by service companies transporting workers to offshore oil and gas rigs, and for maritime search and rescue."

This appears to be a rematch of 2005, when Sikorsky's dominance in winning the contract was first broken with the [Pentagon](#) award of a \$6.1 billion Marine One fleet replacement deal to Agusta and its then-partner, Lockheed Martin. Sikorsky has supplied the presidential helicopter since the Eisenhower administration.

Cost overruns eventually led the Pentagon to pull the contract from Agusta in 2009 and currently, the president is still flying in a Sikorsky helicopter.

While not a big contract as far as money and number of aircraft, it is one of the highest profile deals in the world. Marine One is believed to be the most photographed helicopter on the planet and it provides a certain cache to the company that has that contract, according to analysts. Jurgens would not say which helicopter the Stratford company would be offering for the Air Force contract. A review of the Air Force requirements is under way, and the aircraft that best fits the specifications will be proposed, he said.

Marine One is not the immediate battlefield for the helicopter makers, said [Raymond Jaworowski](#), senior aerospace analyst at Newtown-based Forecast International.

He said the Navy expects it will be eight years before a new helicopter will replace any in the presidential fleet. But the Pentagon is trying to develop an acquisition strategy. Boeing is also expected to offer its Chinook helicopter for consideration, he said.

Military contracts are coming under pressure as the deadline to begin mandatory cuts of \$54.6 billion a year in defense spending approaches in January 2013. The cuts were part of a budget agreement and would continue through 2022.

While the cuts could be drastic, Congress could stop them by passing a plan to cut the deficit by \$1.2 trillion over the same period.

In the meantime, the Pentagon is moving forward with its CRH Air Force program, releasing a draft request for proposals last week.

Agusta and Northrop said they will also offer up the AW101 for the CRH contract. Jaworowski said the initial indications are Sikorsky will offer to provide the UH-60 Blackhawk. As it stands, the Air Force is already moving to use an UH-60 variant for search and rescue missions, the analyst said.

The Air Force is planning to buy 24 UH-60M Blackhawks for the [U.S. Army](#) and then swap those for UH-60Ls outfitted for search and rescue to fill the gap until it can start getting the new CRH aircraft.

Eurocopter, NH Industries, Boeing and Bell are all expected to vie for the CRH program.

rvarnon@ctpost.com; or get updates at <http://twitter.com/financialmines>.

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