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Under the public's radar, 1,100 jet fighter jobs at risk in the Seattle region

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - by [Steve Wilhelm](#) Staff Writer

The Seattle region could lose the last vestiges of its jet fighter manufacturing, and as many as 1,100 jobs, if new funding for the F-22 Raptor doesn't come soon.

Boeing workers assemble the wings and aft section of the fighter in the cavernous 101 building at the company's legendary Developmental Center near Seattle's **Museum of Flight**. Electronic systems are integrated in the nearby 908 building, said Boeing spokesman Doug Cantwell.

The F-22 fabrication work is little known locally because the prime contractor for the fighter is **Lockheed Martin Corp.**, and the finished aircraft are assembled at a Lockheed Martin facility in Marietta, Ga.

Current funding will keep the F-22 in production only through the end of 2009, said Richard Aboulafia, aerospace analyst for The Teal Group outside Washington, D.C.

The problem isn't with the F-22 itself. It is widely acknowledged as the most powerful jet fighter flying in the world today.

The problem is that the world has changed, the Cold War is over, and the F-22's supersonic, radar-evading capabilities are seldom needed. The aircraft, for instance, has not been used in either the Iraq or Afghanistan campaigns, essentially because there are no aircraft for it to fight against.

"It is intended for air superiority, and has great stealth, but of course in Iraq and Afghanistan, we haven't faced those kinds of needs," said Philip Coyle, senior adviser for the Center for Defense Information, in Washington, D.C. "It's quite debatable whether the F-22 is something the Air Force needs these days."

And the bigger problem is cost. At about \$140 million, the F-22 costs twice as much as the F-35 joint strike fighter, a contract that Boeing lost, also to Lockheed Martin, in 2001 after a long-fought campaign. And while the F-35 can't fly as fast as the F-22, it can fly multiple missions, will be used by all military branches rather than just the Air Force, and can be sold overseas to help defray production costs.

And with military budgets pinched by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and with recent changes in the Air Force leadership that have turned it away from a focus on fighter superiority, continued funding for more than the currently funded 183 F-22s seems dubious.

"Here is certainly a battle in terms of budget priorities," said Ray Jaworowski, senior aerospace analyst for Forecast International in Newtown, Conn.

Some observers say that given the difficult funding situation, it's no coincidence that the F-22 strutted its capabilities on July 14 at the Farnborough International Airshow in England, its first demonstration flight at a major air show.

"That's what you see the Air Force do when programs have trouble," Coyle said, "is they fly them a lot at air shows."

The big question for most observers is whether the 2010 budget, to be submitted in February, will contain any more money for F-22s. Aboulaflia said that halting the F-22 would be the end of an era for the armed forces.

"It's a damaging blow to U.S. fighter base; this is the last of the great fighters," he said.

And Steve Kosiak, vice president for budget studies for the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, said halting the F-22 probably would mark the end of fighter production for Boeing, once it finishes making F-15s and F/A-18E/F Super Hornets in St. Louis.

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