F-35 Fighter Jets Needed By 2015 Deadline

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The chief of naval operations said Thursday on-time delivery of Lockheed Martin Corp.'s next-generation Joint Strike Fighter will be critical in closing the gap of the fighter jets needed to match current and future threats.

Navy Adm. Gary Roughead told the House Armed Services Committee that the service's current fleet of legacy F-18s from Boeing Co. is rapidly aging and will need to be replaced quickly. Those jets have seen substantial action supporting forces on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"At the rate of operating these aircraft, the number of our carrier-capable strike fighters will decrease between 2016 and 2020," Roughead said in prepared testimony.

He urged lawmakers to provide stable funding for Lockheed's new stealth jet, known also as the F-35, so the program stays on budget and can be delivered on time to the Navy by 2015.

Gaps in the number of the military's strike-fighters is a shared concern for both lawmakers and the Pentagon. The department acknowledges both challenges and risks in making a transition toward the Joint Strike Fighter.

"We're taking some risk now," Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday. "That's been a decision that's associated with this. And we need to really do the analysis to see how we're going to fill up these decks."

Both lawmakers and Boeing had hoped to see a multiyear deal to buy more Super Hornets included in the fiscal 2010 defense budget. Instead, the Pentagon will buy a total of 31 F-18 aircraft, of which only nine are Super Hornets for the Navy. The rest are EA-18G Growlers, an electronic attack fighter jet, also built by Boeing.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates explained to lawmakers that the Pentagon delayed the multiyear contract to buy more Super Hornets until the department completes its upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review. Only then will the service assess how many tactical aircraft the Pentagon needs for each service while weighing buildups from nations like China and Russia.

The review provides a sweeping analysis that provides guidelines on what the Pentagon will buy for fiscal years 2011 through 2015.

John Kent, a spokesman for Bethesda, Md.-based Lockheed Martin, said the company is on schedule to deliver the aircraft to the Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps.

The Joint Strike Fighter can perform close air support, tactical bombing and air defense missions.

The Navy has more than 600 F-18s in its inventory deployed on carriers worldwide, including in the western Pacific and the Arabian Sea.

The Navy twice has extended the life of the fighter jets to a maximum of 10,000 hours of service to help bridge the gap until the Joint Strike Fighter comes online.

The legacy planes are expected to be retired in 2023.

Separately, Defense Secretary Robert Gates is requesting a total of $6.8 billion, excluding research and development money, in the Pentagon's fiscal 2010 budget to buy 30 Joint Strike Fighters — up from $3.1 billion and 14 aircraft a year earlier. The Pentagon plans to buy 513 F-35s over the next five years, with a total goal of 2,443 aircraft.

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