Air Force Decision On Plane Contract Expected Soon

The Associated Press

WICHITA, Kan. (AP) — An Air Force decision is expected soon on who will win a more than $350 million contract to build 20 aircraft for use in Afghanistan.

The decision comes at a crucial time for Wichita-based Beechcraft, formerly Hawker Beechcraft, which recently emerged from bankruptcy protection. The high-stakes "light air support" contract could ultimately be worth nearly $1 billion, depending on future orders.

Beechcraft had expected a decision Friday but was told there had been a slight delay, Beechcraft spokeswoman Nicole Alexander told The Wichita Eagle (http://bit.ly/Xz3xl5).

The company has proposed the AT-6 attack aircraft, a version of its T-6 trainer, for the project. Sierra Nevada Corp., meanwhile, has partnered with Brazil-based Embraer to offer its Super Tucano.

The planes would give the Afghan National Army Air Corp. a fixed-wing strike capability, and would be delivered over five years.

A single-engine turboprop, dubbed the AT-6, that Beechcraft proposes to build under the LAS contract hasn't been put into production yet, but CEO Bill Boisture said building such a plane is a major objective this year. Winning a customer to launch production is one of the top goals to get Beechcraft "off on the right foot" in 2013, the company told its employees.

The competition for the award has taken nearly three years and has been plagued by delays and legal challenges.

Sierra Nevada Corp. sued in June 2012 for the reinstatement of the contract after the U.S. Air Force canceled the deal following objections by Beechcraft and under pressure from lawmakers. Sierra Nevada contended that the revised bid proposal was tilted in favor of then-Hawker Beechcraft.

The Air Force canceled the contract in March 2012 and launched an investigation after Hawker Beechcraft said it had been wrongly excluded from the bidding process.

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