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## Sikorsky vies for \$15b Air Force contract

PETER URBAN

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The Air Force plans to take an extra three months to decide the winner of a \$15 billion combat search-and-rescue helicopter contract, but Sikorsky Aircraft isn't sweating the delay.

The Stratford-based helicopter manufacturer believes time is on its side in the three-way contest for the CSAR-X contract that now won't likely be decided until October.

Sikorsky Vice President John Pacelli, who is business acquisitions manager for the CSAR-X program, said in a recent interview that the company's proposal has only grown stronger in the three years since it first offered a militarized version of its S-92 helicopter for the task.

"Since the initial time of our proposal in late 2005, many things have come into fruition on the S92 basic platform," Pacelli said.

The Air Force initially awarded the contract to Boeing in November 2006, which offered a variant of its twin-rotor HH-47 Chinook helicopter. But the Government Accountability Office upheld protests filed by Sikorsky and Lockheed Martin, which had offered a variant of the EH101 Merlin helicopter built by AgustaWestland.

The Air Force reopened the bidding process in late 2007 and just released an amended request for proposals that move timelines within the proposal ahead three months to square with a late 2008 contract award. The three bidders have until May 22 to adjust their bids.



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"We originally predicted Boeing would get the contract and it did, but right now the competition is wide open," said Raymond Jaworowski, senior aeronautical analyst with Forecast International, headquartered in Newtown.

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He said the competition right now is "pretty even" and "it's anybody's game."

Jaworowski said only some "technical flaw" in one of the company's designs might influence the Air Force's decision.

"But we don't see that happening," he said.

The Air Force is looking to replace its aging fleet of Sikorsky PaveHawk helicopters that are now used for combat search-and-rescue missions. They expect to have an initial squadron of new rescue helicopters up and running by the second quarter of 2014.

Early on, Sikorsky had been considered the most likely of the competitors to deliver their proposal on time and on budget — something that it has continued to improve upon through the delays, Pacelli said.

"We are increasing capability and performance while reducing

the risk associated with schedule, technology and cost," he said.

Pacelli was hesitant about divulging too many company secrets, but said the S-92 helicopter has matured in the last three years as Sikorsky has delivered orders to other customers including Korea, Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom.

In the United Kingdom, the S-92 helicopter is being used by its version of the Coast Guard for search-and-rescue missions. Some improvements made for that contract will be included in the Air Force proposal and, because they have already been developed and tested, it will necessarily come as a time and cost savings for the Air Force, he said.

"There are a great deal of things that we initially proposed to the Air Force which would have included the need to pay for testing and design that have been designed, developed and tested. So, the risk has been reduced and there is a cost and schedule benefit," Pacelli said.

As an example, Pacelli noted that Sikorsky has successfully developed automated flight control for search-and-rescue, installed a dual rescue hoist system and improved aircraft survivability equipment.

The S-92 is the only helicopter in the competition with fly-by-wire capabilities that can allow for it to be flown by autopilot.

"We've already developed, provided and proven solutions that weren't there when we initially made the proposal," he said.

Sikorsky will face stiffer competition this time around as both Boeing and Lockheed have worked to improve their bids as well.

Lockheed has built new rotor blades that should provide greater lift, making it possible for its helicopter to be powered by engines that already have more than 1,800 flight hours of experience, rather than rely on General Electric Co. to develop a larger engine as it first proposed. In February, Lockheed also successfully tested an aerial refueling maneuver between an Italian C-130 J tanker and a British Merlin helicopter, according to Reuters.

Boeing has been "tight-lipped about possible changes to its HH-47" but may have conducted additional risk-reduction work on rotor de-icing, which is not installed on any Chinook but is certified on the competing helicopters, according to Reuters.



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State Editor Anne M. Amato contributed to this story.

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