Navy Seeks Candidates for Carrier-Based Drones

by Brendan McGarry

The U.S. Navy in coming months plans to begin reviewing potential candidates for its future aircraft carrier-based drone fleet, even as automatic budget cuts threaten to reduce funding for unmanned systems.

The service is still hammering out requirements for the closely-watched program known as the Unmanned Carrier Launched Airborne Surveillance and Strike (UCLASS). It wants to award contracts this summer to begin developing the system. The Air Force may eventually follow suit.

Northrop Grumman Corp., the Navy's prime contractor for a precursor program, is expected to square off against other defense giants Lockheed Martin Corp., Boeing Co. and General Atomics for the production work.

"Our offering will be determined by the program's requirements," Carl Johnson, a vice president at Northrop, said in an e-mail. He's also the company manager of the Unmanned Combat Air System, a precursor program designed to demonstrate the technology.

Northrop has built two prototypes of the X-47B, a sleek, arrowhead-shaped aircraft the size of a fighter jet. One is conducting trials aboard the carrier Harry S. Truman (CVN-75), where this summer it could become the first unmanned jet aircraft to take off and land from an aircraft carrier.

The other companies are also pitching new products. Lockheed has the Sea Ghost, Boeing has the Phantom Ray and General Atomics has the Sea Avenger.

General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc., which makes the Predator and Reaper drones used extensively during the U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, was the first company to announce its intent to compete for the Navy program, spokeswoman Kimberly Kasitz said in an e-mail.

"We recognize that our Navy is in ever greater demand worldwide," Kasitz said. The program has the potential to "extend the influence of the Carrier Strike Group greatly," she said.

Boeing will offer an affordable solution that provides constant operational coverage, spokeswoman Deborah VanNierop said in an e-mail. The company "has more than 90 years of naval aviation experience, including delivering carrier-based aircraft to the U.S. Navy," she said.

The Navy last month said it will pay all four contractors for their designs as part of a plan to pick a winner in mid-2014 and field the aircraft "within three to six years," according to a notice posted on a government website.

The service plans to issue a request for proposals as early as next month, program manager Charlie Nava said in an e-mail. His office will continue to assess the impact of automatic budget cuts, known as sequestration, as the Navy works to mitigate their effect, he said.

The Defense Department faces $1 trillion in cuts over the next decade under deficit-reduction legislation passed in 2011. Half of that amount, about $500 billion, will come from automatic, across-the-board cuts - unless Congress and the White House agree to an alternative spending plan.

The Republican-controlled House and Democrat-controlled Senate have approved competing budgets and remain at an impasse over taxes and spending. Lawmakers allowed the automatic cuts - designed to be so painful they would compel both parties to strike a deal - to take effect March 1. The cuts will slice about $41 billion from the Pentagon's budget in the remaining half of fiscal 2013, which ends Sept. 30.

The downturn is already reflected in planned spending on drones.

The Defense Department is projected to spend $20.6 billion on unmanned systems in the four years through fiscal 2016, down from $27.7 billion projected last year for the same period, according to figures presented by Dyke Weatherington, director of unmanned warfare and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance at the Pentagon, at a conference earlier this year in Washington.

The Navy plans to spend $2.31 billion through fiscal 2017 to research and develop the carrier-based drone program, according to a report <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/653379.pdf> last month from the Government Accountability office, the investigative arm of Congress.

"New programs typically face some uncertainties," Robert Ruszkowski, an engineer and business development manager at Lockheed, said in an e-mail. The company sees the aircraft providing levels of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance "that are likely to remain in demand and relevant."