

## Lawmakers Press Gates to Keep Cargo Plane

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Senior lawmakers are pleading with Defense Secretary Robert Gates to keep one of the Army's much-coveted cargo aircraft programs.

Reps. Gene Taylor (D-Miss.), a veteran defense authorizer, and Chet Edwards (D-Texas), an appropriator overseeing military construction, are among more than a dozen lawmakers who signed a letter to the Defense secretary asking him to retain the Army's C-27J cargo aircraft.

Del. Madeleine Bordallo (D-Guam) and Rep. Cliff Stearns (R-Fla.) have spearheaded the effort.

Gates is planning to slash the nearly \$3 billion C-27J program in half and give the Air Force full responsibility over the aircraft. The Air Force and Army were supposed to jointly oversee the program. L-3 Communications and Alenia North America hold the contract for the cargo plane. Alenia North America, part of the Italian conglomerate Finmeccanica, builds the plane.

In their letter to Gates, the lawmakers expressed "deep concern" about the plans to whittle down the program. The Hill recently reported about those plans.

"We believe that if implemented such cuts would impede the ability of the United States Army, specifically the Army National Guard, to meet intra-theater lift requirements for 'the last tactical mile' as well as severely constrain the Army and Air National Guard's ability to respond to a domestic disaster," the lawmakers wrote to Gates.

The Army in particular has been adamant about buying a smaller cargo aircraft that can go deep into the battlefield to deliver needed supplies to troops. The Army has been relying heavily on its Chinook helicopters for that purpose. Army officials have argued for months that Afghanistan's terrain, for example, has put tremendous pressure on these helicopters, which are now filling the void of a cargo aircraft that can fly "the last tactical mile."

Additionally, the lawmakers warn that any changes to the program "will risk the readiness of our Army, Air Force and National Guard to respond to the full spectrum of threats and requirements."

The Air Force was expected to receive the aircraft a couple years after the Army, which has already received two C-27Js and has 11 others under contract. It is yet unclear what will happen to the Army's aircraft that were delivered and those under contract. They were initially meant to replace 43 of the Army's beaten-up C-23 Sherpas.

According to a Pentagon memorandum obtained by The Hill, the Army and Air Force have until May 30 to present to Gates an implementation plan that would basically transfer all resources and responsibility for the aircraft to the Air Force. The plan is supposed to address when and how the mission will be transferred fully to the Air Force, as well as tackle the disposition of the Army program, including the 13 aircraft already on order.

The Army National Guard was expecting to receive the C-27J in 12 states: California, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Alaska and Washington state. Each was supposed to receive four airplanes. Alaska was supposed to share its planes with Guam.

Under the initial plan, the Air Force was expected to receive 24 C-27Js — four planes in six states across the country: Connecticut, Michigan, Maryland, North Dakota, Ohio and Mississippi. Now, under the proposed plan, the remainder of the 38 aircraft will likely go to the active Air Force.

In their letter to Gates, the lawmakers expressed fear of the Air National Guard's losing the C-27J. They stressed that without the C-27J, many National Guard units across the country that lost their flying missions during the latest base closure and realignment round would be unable to retain personnel and skills that have taken years to cultivate. Ultimately, it would harm the Air National Guard's ability to respond to domestic crises, the lawmakers wrote.

Additionally, the lawmakers challenged Gates by arguing that the proposed cuts are "in direct contradiction" to the Pentagon's own conclusion in a congressionally mandated report that both the Air Force and the Army should be flying the C-27J.

The missive, sent to Gates on Friday, was also signed by Reps. Ander Crenshaw (R-Fla.), Ralph Hall (R-Texas), Corrine Brown (D-Fla.), Ginny Brown-Waite (R-Fla.), Dan Burton (R-Ind.), Jeff Miller (R-Fla.), Roscoe Bartlett (R-Md.), John Mica (R-Fla.) and Jim Jordan (R-Ohio).

Alenia North America was planning to manufacture the plane in Jacksonville, Fla., but it's unclear whether the smaller quantity would give the company more incentive to build in the United States than Italy. The C-27J already is built with parts and components from 78 U.S. suppliers in 23 states.