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Pentagon eyes F-35 fighters, not pricier F-22s

By Jim Wolf

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WASHINGTON, Feb 12 (Reuters) - The U.S. Defense Department is likely to speed production of Lockheed Martin Corp F-35 Joint Strike Fighter rather than buy more of the company's pricier F-22 fighters, the Pentagon's No. 2 official told Congress Tuesday.

"I do not believe the F-22s will be replacements for the F-15," Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England said at a Senate Budget Committee hearing on the Pentagon's fiscal 2009 budget request. The Boeing Co F-15 is an older-model fighter that has been subject to groundings in recent months after one broke up in flight.

"So I would expect instead we would try to accelerate the Joint Strike Fighter, which is more the class of the F-15," he said. "So the Air Force would move into Joint Strike Fighter and not into the much more expensive F-22 airplane."

The F-35 is a family of warplanes for the U.S. Air Force, Marine Corps and Navy, as well as for export. Current Pentagon plans call for production of 2,458 aircraft in three versions over a 28-year delivery period.

The Defense Department left the F-22's fate uncertain in the \$515.4 billion military spending blueprint sent to Congress a week ago. The budget lacks funding to shut down the F-22 line as well as any seed money for future purchases.

But the head of a House of Representatives panel that funds the U.S. military said Tuesday he opposed shutting down the F-22 line.

"We don't want to see the F-22 line shut down," Rep. John Murtha, chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on defense, said in an interview after speaking at a defense technology conference sponsored by Aviation Week magazine.

Murtha, a Pennsylvania Democrat, said he also opposed shutting down the Boeing C-17 cargo aircraft production line, another decision left in the lurch by President George Bush's fiscal 2009 budget plan, which Congress may now rework.

He said he would recommend the purchase of 14 C-17s with funds from the supplemental budget Bush is seeking in fiscal 2008 to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"And we're also looking at whether significant savings can be achieved if we procure additional C-130s," Murtha said, referring to Lockheed Martin four-engine turboprop military transport aircraft.