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By Daniel Wasserbly

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The Army today announced its new plan for fielding the first iteration of Future Combat Systems equipment to infantry brigade combat teams, garnering support from Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the chairman of the House Appropriations defense subcommittee.

"I was very impressed by the briefing that I received with [the] restructured FCS program," Gates said today. "Frankly, I think FCS as they've restructured it deserves support," he added.

Yesterday, Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey presented Gates with the service's plan to alter its first "spin out" of FCS technology to soldiers. Infantry brigade combat teams are now slated to receive the equipment in 2011; originally, this gear would have been fielded to heavy brigade combat teams in that same time frame.

Gates was pleased with the program's restructuring "in part because it focuses on what they can do near-term to help the infantry brigade combat teams and to get new technologies into their hands," he said. Army combat units in Iraq mostly operate now as motorized infantry.

The defense secretary has recently urged the military to focus modernization efforts on the needs of today's asymmetric operations and avoid focusing on what he calls "next-war-itis."

The restructuring is meant to better align FCS with such priorities. It will add unmanned aerial systems and unmanned ground systems, while removing some vehicle networking packages, from the first iteration of FCS equipment, called Spin Out 1.

FCS is the Army's premier modernization program -- it encompasses various manned and unmanned platforms, sensors and battle-command and high-speed networking tools, which it will provide to soldiers through three technology insertions, or "spin outs";

House Appropriations defense subcommittee Chairman Rep. John Murtha (D-PA) said in a statement today that the restructuring convinced him "the Army is making changes that will ultimately make the FCS program more viable."

Murtha has encouraged the Army to pare down the overall FCS program and focus its efforts on spinning out technology to the current force, as Inside the Army reported earlier this year.

"The committee will evaluate the details of these proposed changes to ensure that these technologies are both mature and integrated with the Army's reset and rehabilitation plans," Murtha said in today's statement.

In a joint statement from House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ike Skelton (D-MO) and air and land forces subcommittee Chairman Neil Abercrombie (D-HI), the two said that while they support FCS spin outs, they "are concerned that this new plan may not allow for adequate testing of the equipment due to its very tight schedule."

"The overall FCS program remains far over budget, far behind schedule, and unaffordable in the long term given the many other pressing needs facing the United States Army," they add.

Skelton and Abercrombie said they "look forward to seeing more changes to this program in the future."

In a briefing today with defense reporters, Army officials said the program's restructuring would not increase its overall cost, which the service estimates at about \$160 billion.

Reprogramming actions, however, would be required in fiscal years 2008 and 2009 to accommodate the changes to Spin Out 1, they said. The reprogrammings will be internal, using funds from within the program -- mainly research, development, test and evaluation money, Lt. Gen. Ross Thompson, military deputy to the Army acquisition executive, told ITA after the briefing.