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The Hill

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The already troubled presidential helicopter program may face new challenges as Navy officials brace for as little as one-quarter of the money needed to pay for the new chopper next year.

The Pentagon requested more than \$1 billion in fiscal 2009 for the VH-71 presidential helicopter. The Navy recently restructured the program, which has nearly doubled in cost during the last three years. The Navy blamed the price increase on complex requirements and an initial schedule that was determined to be too aggressive.

Congressional leaders have talked about pushing off all appropriations bills until President Bush leaves the White House. If that happens, the helicopter program would be funded at the 2008 level, at least temporarily. That could mean only \$231 million.

Navy officials have started to worry that little to no money next year could have severe repercussions on a program that the Navy and its contractors, Lockheed Martin and AgustaWestland, have struggled to turn around in recent months.

The two contenders for the White House, Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Barack Obama (D-Ill.), have said they will take a closer look at the program, which has gone from an estimated cost of \$6.1 billion to \$11.2 billion.

Both stopped short of saying whether they would cancel the program, according to The Associated Press.

Pushing a funding decision into 2009 and onto a new administration could cast more uncertainty on the program and put pressure on the president to tackle the issue, widely considered symptomatic of the skyrocketing costs of defense programs.

The new presidential helicopter is designed to ferry the president on shorter trips — oftentimes from the White House to Andrews Air Force Base, Md. — and would be equipped with a high-speed, protected communications suite, advanced navigation systems, a kitchen and a bathroom.

The presidential perks on the new choppers would be closer to Air Force One than the 30-year-old Marine One helicopters they would replace.

The VH-71 is supposed to be developed in two phases. The first would focus on five helicopters to be delivered by September 2010, according to Navy officials.

Work on the 23 helicopters in the second phase — all with significant changes from the first batch — is scheduled to start this October. That coincides with the start of fiscal year 2009. The second phase is projected to be complete by 2017.

“Issues with 2008 funding slowed the program down, meaning increment one will be operational no earlier than 2010,” Navy Capt. Donald Gaddis, who is in charge of the program, said at the Farnborough Airshow in England last week.

The helicopters in the second increment will have an increased range and upgraded navigation, communications and connectivity.

The Navy’s request for VH-71 in 2009 is for \$1.04 billion in research and development funds and \$31 million in procurement.

The Pentagon placed a stop-work order on the second increment, so about \$313 million would be needed to start the increment and about \$700 million to continue the work on it, according to industry sources.

Without a certain prospect for a defense bill next year, some concern is starting to creep into industry, the Pentagon and congressional offices.

Appropriators can determine whether to allocate more money for certain programs in the continuing resolution, but funding the VH-71 at \$1 billion is highly unlikely among several other priorities, said congressional sources.

Both House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said they want a defense bill before the start of the new fiscal year. A Democratic aide said that lawmakers could end up passing a 2009 defense appropriations bill and seeking a continuing resolution on the other 11 appropriations bills.

But discussions over the appropriations process have been in flux. House Appropriations Defense subcommittee chairman Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) told The Hill that the implications of not having an actual defense bill could be "severe";

He said he has not started thinking about those yet, and has tried to prepare the bill in case it can be brought up before Congress adjourns at the end of September. It is unlikely that Congress will take up the bill before the August recess.

The VH-71 program would be perhaps one of the hardest hit if a defense bill is delayed, but is certainly not the only one. Programs in the research and development phase would suffer; programs that are starting or ramping up would be affected as well. Among those ramping up is the high-profile Joint Strike Fighter program, which also could be caught in the funding quandary.

Together with the Joint Strike Fighter, the presidential helicopter is one of the Navy's top five programs in the research and development phase. The VH-71 funding request for 2009 represents 5.4 percent of the Navy's overall request of \$19.3 billion for research and development.

A Lockheed Martin spokesman did not comment on the appropriations bill but instead touted what he called the program's accomplishments.