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Senior defense appropriators and other lawmakers are souring on a program to build a new presidential helicopter because it could wind up costing nearly twice as much as originally advertised.

President Obama has promised to trim military programs with excessive costs or outdated missions. It remains to be seen whether he will be willing to start with his own helicopter, the VH-71, which the Pentagon's acquisition chief says in an internal memo exemplifies common problems that drive up the costs and delay the schedules of major defense programs.

Whatever the administration's take on the helicopter initiative, which is run by the Navy, it faces serious scrutiny in Congress.

At a Feb. 11 hearing of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, Chairman John P. Murtha, D-Pa., called the VH-71 program "one of the worst examples" of a defense program run amok. Murtha said he recently told program officials: "We're not going to pay \$500 million for one helicopter. Period."

The average cost is closer to \$400 million per helicopter, Navy figures show—a total of \$11.2 billion for 28 helicopters. But that's compared to \$6.5 billion estimated when the program began exactly four years ago.

"It's just frightening how they throw money around like it's out of style," Murtha said. In a brief interview after the hearing, he said the helicopter's performance requirements were "unacceptable," and warned: "We're going to force them to a more reasonable answer."

Similarly, C.W. Bill Young of Florida, the panel's senior Republican, said

in an interview: "I was a supporter, but I'm willing to reconsider, because of the tremendous cost." The appropriators are not the only ones up in arms. Lawmakers from Connecticut, where Sikorsky Aircraft Corp. lost the 2005 competition to build the president's helicopter fleet, are hoping to get another shot at the business.

They hope Sikorsky, which builds the current fleet of helicopters known as "Marine Ones," can capitalize on the troubles faced by the current contractor, Lockheed Martin Corp., which builds the helicopters mostly in New York state and Texas with help from firms in the United Kingdom and Italy.

In a Feb. 11 letter to Navy Secretary Donald Winter, members of the Connecticut delegation asked for a report and a briefing on the program, including an analysis of the merits of recompeting it or splitting the buy between Sikorsky and Lockheed Martin.

Members such as Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., also make a "buy American" argument in Sikorsky's favor, saying jobs and even national security are on the line.

"At what point do you say, enough is enough?" she said.

The first group of four helicopters is supposed to be delivered to the Marine Corps squadron that handles presidential helicopters by 2011. All 28 of the helicopters are expected to be delivered by 2019.

But the program's cost has grown to the point where the secretary of Defense must certify to Congress that it is in the national interest and meets other criteria in order for it to continue. The certification is due 120 days after the president's fiscal 2010 budget goes to Congress. But the Obama administration will have to make a decision about the coming fiscal year's activities before the secretary makes his determination.

Obama and Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates have been silent on the outlook for this program. But John Young, the Pentagon's acquisition chief, cited the VH-71 program in a Jan. 30 memo to Gates, saying it exemplifies problems that plague other Defense Department initiatives.

"Higher costs, whether based on low estimates or poor enterprise management, is unacceptable and harmful to the defense enterprise," John Young wrote. "The acquisition team bears significant responsibility for moving forward with these programs built on inadequate foundations."

The problem with the VH-71 program is how much it is being asked to accomplish, according to defense experts and congressional aides who follow the program closely. The VH-71 is doing what two types of helicopters do now. One version of today's Marine One lands on the White House lawn; the other is deployed around the world in places where the president will travel. The VH-71 would do both in a single aircraft.

The new helicopter's costs have risen so much because it will carry more people, more communications gear, more "survivability" equipment and fly longer ranges. It must be able to counter surface-to-air missiles. It bristles with phone, Internet, fax, printers and video screens.

And the communications gear must hold up even after an electromagnetic pulse effect from a nuclear blast.

It is supposed to be modeled on a commercially available helicopter, but the new requirements have made it necessary to replace the engine and rotors. A requirement for increased range and ability to hover for prolonged periods also are driving up costs.

"Basically, it has to be Air Force One," said one aide.

It must accomplish all these tasks but not get too large that it cannot be put aboard a C-17 transport plane and flown to any overseas locale where the president needs it.

But the Navy tried to do all this on a schedule that was not realistic and worsened the cost risks, experts said.

In 2005, the former director of Pentagon testing, Tom Christie, said the rushed schedule violated "fly before buy" principles and was "not executable";

"It appears that Mr. Christie may have had a point," said Christopher Bolcom, a defense analyst with the Congressional Research Service.

The program's future will be determined in the weeks ahead by Obama's team. The White House Military Office works closely with the Navy on the initiative. But the discussions may not yet have begun.

"To date, the program office has not had official contact with the Obama administration, but we look forward to working with the new commander in chief," said a set of "talking points"; the Navy gave Congress in late January, when it informed members that the costs were continuing to spiral upwards.

