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By Bill Rigby, Reuters

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EVERETT, Wash., Feb 16 (Reuters) - The chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives' appropriations subcommittee on defense renewed a call on Monday for the Pentagon to consider splitting a \$35 billion aerial refueling tanker contract between Boeing Co and a rival team of EADS and Northrop Grumman Corp.

The call, by Pennsylvania Democratic Rep. John Murtha, is a direct challenge to the Pentagon, which has been adamant that contracting only one supplier would be the cheapest for U.S. taxpayers.

It is the latest twist in an almost decade-long saga of deciding who should build tankers to refuel U.S.U.S. forces around the world. jet fighters and supply

"I'm trying to figure out a way to convince the secretary of defense to at least look at two airplanes, or both of them," said Murtha, after a tour of Boeing's widebody aircraft plant in Everett, north of Seattle.

"My decision is not where the contract goes, but to come up with the money to pay for the contract once the Air Force makes a decision," said Murtha. "We are trying to come up with ways to get the military to make a decision earlier."

Attempts to start building replacements for the aging U.S. tanker fleet have been bogged down since 2001, when the Air Force hatched a plan to lease and then buy tankers from Boeing, which was subsequently derailed by a procurement scandal.

The Northrop/EADS team won the contract last year, but the Government Accountability Office later found errors in the award after a protest by Boeing.

The Pentagon is now looking to start a new competition for the contract this year with an award in early 2010. So far, both Defense Secretary Robert Gates and undersecretary of defense for acquisition John Young have both come out publicly in favor of a single-source tanker.

Murtha, whose defense subcommittee is crucial in establishing how the \$500 billion-plus U.S. defense budget is spent, has previously called for splitting the order to break the logjam between the camps and their rival congressional backers.

He called for a split buy last month when he visited Mobile, Alabama, where Northrop and EADS planned to assemble their tanker based on the Airbus A330-200 commercial airliner.

Murtha added that decisions on other major defense programs needed to be made first, to make room for funding the tanker contract. That includes a decision on Lockheed Martin Corp's F-22 fighter jet, which is due end production in 2009, but may yet be extended.

"If we can get the F-22 out of the way," Murtha said, the path to providing funding for the tanker would be made easier.

"I don't mean to cancel the program (the F-22)... We fund it or get rid of it, one way or the other."