

STATES TRYING TO LAND NEW MILITARY PLANE

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A new military aircraft is envisioned as the future for Air National Guard units around the country that will lose aircraft as a result of last year's round of base closings and could help preserve jobs for base communities.

The Joint Cargo Aircraft, still in the development stage, would be used by the Army and Air Force as a quick, light cargo plane in war zones such as Iraq and to respond to emergencies such as Hurricane Katrina.

The association representing National Guard officers is asking its members to push congressional lawmakers to approve money for the planes. The anticipated 145 aircraft will be hotly pursued by Air National Guard bases affected by last year's Base Realignment and Closure process.

"Any airfield in the country scheduled to lose aircraft as a result of BRAC is probably looking at the JCA as a potential replacement," said John Goheen, spokesman for the National Guard Association of the United States.

Fifteen Air National Guard bases in as many states will be left without aircraft as a result of the base closings and consolidations approved by Congress and the president last year, according to Air Force Major Gen. Roger Lempke, president of the Adjutants General Association of the United States.

The Air Force announced that the Air National Guard in Connecticut, North Dakota and Puerto Rico, which are all losing Air National Guard planes, will be first in line for the new aircraft.

Lempke said Ohio, Michigan and Tennessee have lobbied for wings of the new light cargo aircraft, and officials in Ohio and Michigan said the National Guard Bureau has told them they will get wings of the new aircraft. Tennessee officials said they haven't heard yet.

In Ohio, the planes would go to the 179th Airlift Wing at Mansfield Air National Guard Base, which will lose its C-130 cargo aircraft as a result of the 2005 base closure round, said Mark Wayda, spokesman for the Ohio National Guard.

"From the state's perspective, you're talking about jobs, you're talking about economic development," Wayda said.

He said the new aircraft also would allow the state National Guard to move personnel and equipment when responding to disasters.

Officials in Battle Creek, Mich., were jubilant after receiving word Thursday they will get a wing of Joint Cargo Aircraft. The new planes are expected to preserve 300 jobs at the 110th Fighter Wing at W.K. Kellogg Airport Air National Guard base, which will lose its A-10 aircraft to a base across the state.

"It certainly strengthens our story when we are out doing economic development recruiting," Mayor John Godfrey said. He said the city is using its Air National Guard base in an effort to lure aviation companies to the area.

Nationally, the Joint Cargo Aircraft would replace the Army's aging C-23 Sherpas and the Air Force's C-130s, both cargo planes.

Once Congress gets behind the Joint Cargo Aircraft program, every state that wants a wing will get one, predicted defense analyst John Pike of GlobalSecurity.org.

Lawmakers like to funnel federal dollars to Air National Guard bases because many of the bases are located at local airports and the federal money helps maintain the airports, Pike said. The Pentagon also likes to spread its money around the country to build goodwill for the military, he said.

"Once they get this thing going, it'll take on a life of its own," Pike said.

The Pentagon's long-range purchasing plan includes only enough money for Joint Cargo Aircraft for Connecticut, North Dakota and Puerto Rico, Wayda said. Congress will have to authorize additional money if other states are to get the new aircraft.

Pentagon officials have asked Congress for \$109 million to launch the Joint Cargo Aircraft program, which probably will adapt an existing commercial plane for military use. The money would be used to identify the plane and flight test it.

The House version of the fiscal 2007 defense bill includes the money, but the Senate version doesn't. Negotiators from both chambers must craft a compromise.

Lempke said Sen. John McCain, an Arizona Republican, has blocked funding for the Joint Cargo Aircraft in the Senate bill because he believes the Army and Air Force aren't providing required information on the new program.

McCain's office did not respond to requests for comment.

Lempke said it's important to get the money this year to meet the tight schedule the Air Force and Army have set for developing the new aircraft. The goal is for the Air Force to start buying the Joint Cargo Aircraft in 2010 and give it to states to replace older aircraft that will be retired or moved elsewhere by 2011 under the base-closure changes.

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