



F-35 Lightning II Program

Public Affairs Release – 2015 06 01

KENDALL CITES PROGRESS ON F-35 PERFORMANCE, SCHEDULE, COST

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WASHINGTON - The F-35 Lightning II joint strike fighter program is making progress on performance, schedule and cost, Frank Kendall, undersecretary of defense for acquisition, technology and logistics, told U.S. reporters last week during a teleconference from Norway.

Kendall was in Oslo to attend the two-day F-35 CEO Conference, an annual meeting in which senior U.S. government leaders, international partners and industry members discuss the F-35 program's status and strategic outlook. This was the first year a partner nation hosted the high-level meeting.

"We're continuing to execute to the [2011 F-35 Technical Baseline Review]," Kendall said, "and we're exceeding our expectations on cost and performance and we're close to our projections on schedule."

The undersecretary noted that there was a fundamental change in the direction of discussions at the Oslo meeting.

Focusing on the Future

"We are not sitting here worried about the risk of completing baseline development," he said. "We're turning our focus much more toward fielding the program, upgrades in the future and getting whatever efficiencies we can going forward."

As she began the meeting, Norway's Defense Minister Ine Marie Eriksen Sørdeide used a phrase that Kendall quoted to members of the media as representing the status of the F-35 program.

"We're 'turning the future into the present,' she said, "and I think the present is going to be much more about F-35 operations than it has been before, and we're looking forward to continuing to make progress in that regard."

Kendall said next year he hopes to hold the CEO meeting at the first operational base for the F-35, after the Marine Corps' F-35B reaches initial operational capability, or IOC, later this year.

Initial Operational Capability

IOC refers to fielding F-35 squadrons capable of handling a range of combat missions. For the Marine Corps, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 121, or VMFA-121, known as the Green Knights and based at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Arizona, will be the first F-35B operational squadron.

"We're on track to do that, Kendall added, "and we're on track to have Air Force IOC the following year and the Navy a couple of years after that, and our partners will start IOC-ing as well."

F-35 follow-on development was one of the meeting topics, he said.

"The threat constantly changes out there. People develop weapons that they want to have integrated into the platform and technology has matured that we want to insert into the platform," Kendall said, "so we designed [the] F-35 so we can upgrade it throughout its lifecycle."

Changing Threats

The baseline F-35 configuration, designated 3-F, was defined some time ago, he added.



A Luke Air Force Base F-35A Lightning II stands by to take off at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., April 15, 2015. U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Thomas Spangler

Over the intervening time much has changed, the undersecretary said, “so we want to take advantage of more mature technologies ... and we want to respond to threat changes, particularly in areas like electronic warfare, and we want to integrate newer weapons that are coming online.”

Norway, Turkey and the United Kingdom also want to integrate weapons into the aircraft that were not part of the baseline, he said.

Integrating Weapons

“The detailed planning for that was discussed,” Kendall said, “and will take place over the next few months.” He said the program, for some of the weapons, already has begun compatibility fit checks and other initial actions.

On the production side, Kendall said the attendees discussed the possibility of implementing what they called a block buy.

“We’re not quite ready for a standard multiyear procurement yet, but we do think that starting in about fiscal year 2018 we’ll be ready for a 3-year block buy that will require congressional approval,” he said.

“We still have some work to do there but we’re feeling optimistic enough about the program that we’re going to proceed with the planning, and we’ll be talking to Congress about it,” he noted.

Block Buy

For partners and U.S. foreign military sales customers, commitment to such a block buy could save them money that Kendall said he’d like to see reach “double digits.” Block buys will occur in fiscal years 2018, 2019 and 2020, he added.

On the support side, Kendall said, “the complexity and scope of the program is enormous, with all the international partners, with the different builds that we’re fielding, the different IOCs that are coming on board, and we’re starting to come to grips with how we’re going to organize for that a few years ahead of us.”

In all of these things, Kendall said, “whether it’s development, production or support, the focus is on cost and driving cost down in the program and making the F-35 as affordable and cost effective as it possibly can be.”