



KC-46A: BIG AIRPLANE BEING DELAYED BY A FEW BIG PROBLEMS

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Aug. 30--Delays with development of a new Air Force tanker scheduled to be based and serviced in Oklahoma are causing turbulence at the Pentagon, but local leaders say they're not too worried about a project that is expected to pump millions of dollars into their economies.

Both Tinker Air Force Base and Altus Air Force Base will serve important roles in maintaining and operating the KC-46A Pegasus aircraft. Tinker will serve as the repair depot for the KC-46A, much like it has done for other aircraft over its long history. Altus will serve as the primary training base

for new KC-46A flight crews. The base in southwest Oklahoma is scheduled to take delivery of combat-ready planes by August 2017.

But repeated test flight delays and problems with the newly designed aircraft's fuel system are threatening to push back the delivery date.

The airplane is important for both communities. For Tinker, the new repair work means the base will remain of high importance to the military for a long time to come. For Altus, which also trains aircrews for the C-17 and the KC-135, the military's current primary airborne tanker, the new mission means more employment.

"We're expecting 350 new jobs that will come to the base and we expect two thirds of those to be civilian jobs," Altus Chamber of Commerce President Brian Bush said. "This is a project that will have a massive impact on the economy here in Altus."

Bush said the community stays in close contact with the Air Force and that Boeing, the plane's manufacturer, already has a presence in Altus. Bush said he isn't concerned about potential delays.

"The delivery date hasn't been affected at this point so we are not concerned even if there is a delay because we know the project is still on track and Altus will benefit from that," Bush said.

Earlier this year, ground was broken on a flight training center, a fuselage training facility, new aircraft hangars and other renovations at Altus. The project is expected to cost about \$56 million. Training for new pilots won't wait for the arrival of the aircraft. It's supposed to begin next year at Altus.

Tinker upgrades

Last year, Congress approved \$111 million in construction on a 158-acre site in Midwest City that was once the BNSF Railway yard. State and local officials worked with the Air Force to acquire the land for \$44 million.

Construction on the new site was necessary because Tinker's current facilities aren't big enough to house the KC-46A repair depot.

Work is expected to begin next summer and will provide a two-bay maintenance hangar and other infrastructure.

"The KC-46 Pegasus opens up an entirely new workload for Tinker and we are very excited about that," said Brig. Gen. Mark Johnson, commander of the Oklahoma City Air Logistics Complex. "It brings us a fifth-generation refueling platform to ensure America can deliver air power across the globe any time."

The new workload will involve more technical repair processes, new materials, new engineering and new software, Johnson said.

"And those opportunities are exciting. These are new aviation skills that we'll require of our workers and new skills mean new training," he said.

"Any time we have the opportunity to do something new it's exciting," Johnson said.

"This is one of the Air Force's top acquisition priorities, and we are proud to have been selected to

be the home for maintaining this new aircraft. The reality is Tinker and Oklahoma City (Air Logistics Complex) is taking great care of a fleet of really old aircraft."

Dazzling features

The Pegasus is a replacement for the nearly 60-year-old KC-135. Those who have flown on a Boeing 767 airliner might recognize the Pegasus as essentially the same air frame.

According to Boeing, the new aircraft is capable of refueling any plane that is outfitted for airborne refueling no matter the mission.

According to Boeing's website, the versatile plane can be varied to carry about 50 troops, cargo, patients or all three, while still carrying out its refueling mission.

It can also "detect, avoid, defeat and survive threats using multiple layers of protection," enabling the aircraft to operate safely in "medium-threat environments."

The Pegasus also features a refueling boom near the end of each wing to go along with the center-line boom mounted in the tail section. Most current aerial refueling airplanes use only a tail-mounted boom to transfer fuel.

Up front, the cockpit is similar to that of a Boeing 787 Dreamliner with a fully integrated glass cockpit with 15-inch monitors in the console. Boeing says the advanced cockpit will allow pilots greater situational awareness that can be critical to a successful mission.

And the crew operating the refueling booms will no longer look through a window to guide them into place. Instead, they'll use a new three-dimensional display.

The two engines on the Pegasus also are more fuel efficient than the current four-engine KC-135 which is based on a Boeing 707.

The 767 is among the most fuel efficient planes in its class and the KC-46 is expected to also feature enhanced fuel efficiency, according to Boeing.

Plenty of problems

Boeing announced Aug. 17 the first test flight of the fully operational KC-46 will be delayed until late September or early October. That comes after the test already had been pushed back from the spring.

One of the biggest problems is the plane's fuel system.

The issue, which Boeing says will require several redesigns and retrofits, is expected to cost the company more than \$800 million.

Some delays resulted from a mislabeled chemical being loaded into the fuel system by mistake during a test, damaging the system.

Wiring and software problems also delayed test flights and added more than \$420 million in costs to Boeing.

Suppliers have contributed to some of the problems, according to the Government Accountability Office. The primary aerial refueling boom has had issues with parts deliveries and other suppliers have had difficulty making the refueling pods on each of the plane's wings.

Last week, United States Air Force Secretary Deborah James said there is no more room for error.

"We're in the process of going over the schedule again to see whether we can see our way clear...", James said. "Certainly, the margin in the schedule is all but gone at this point."

Boeing said it is committed to delivering the first 18 planes by 2017.

Boeing spokeswoman Caroline Hutcheson said most of the problems have been worked out. She said large scale development programs typically face problems and delays. The company has been working through the complex challenges unique to the KC-46.

"The good news is that we discovered these issues before we got into KC-46 flight test," Hutcheson said. "We are now back on track for the first tanker-configured flight in the coming months."

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