GERMANY TO BUY TRITON DRONE TO REPLACE CANCELED EURO HAWK-SOURCES

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Germany's defense ministry has decided to buy high-altitude MQ-4C Triton unmanned surveillance planes built by U.S. weapons maker Northrop Grumman Corp for deliveries after 2025, ministry sources said on Tuesday.

The new drones will replace the Euro Hawk program, which Berlin canceled in May 2013 after it became clear that it could cost up to 600 million euros to get the system approved for use in civil airspace.

The sources confirmed a story originally reported by the Sueddeutsche Zeitung.

The plan, which must still be approved by parliament, calls for Germany to buy the new aircraft from the U.S. Navy, which awarded Northrop a contract to design the unmanned aircraft in April 2008. Sensors for the new aircraft are to be built by Airbus, as planned under the previous program, the sources said.

It was not immediately clear how many planes the ministry would buy, or at what cost. Under the canceled program, it had planned to buy five Euro Hawk aircraft for 1.2 billion euros.

Experts do not expect to run into any problems winning aviation approval for the new aircraft,

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which is launched from land and is programmed to fly autonomously as high as 60,000 feet to gather a wide array of intelligence data.

Then-Defence Minister Thomas de Maiziere came under pressure after he was forced to cancel the previous Euro Hawk program in 2013 after it became clear it would cost hundreds of millions of euros to win aviation approval for the aircraft.

Ursula von der Leyen was moved into the defense minister job later that year, and took office vowing to reform Germany's ineffective procurement system

Northrop developed the Triton, a marine-based variant of its initial Global Hawk surveillance drone, for the U.S. Navy. Ministry sources said the aviation approval for Triton would be less costly because it was baked in from the start of the program.

07 MARCH 2017

SOURCE: REUTERS
ARTICLE LINK:
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