FIVE AEROSPACE COMPANIES BATTLE TO REPLACE CANADA'S CF-18S

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Five aerospace companies are offering their fighter jets as potential replacement for Canada’s fleet of aging CF-18s, including Lockheed Martin’s F-35, the very jet Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has pledged not to buy.

The federal government had set Friday as the deadline for potential suppliers to respond to a detailed questionnaire outlining the costs and capabilities of their jets, as well as benefits that would flow to Canadian companies.

The defence department said Saturday that five companies responded: Boeing Company, Dassault Aviation, Eurofighter, Lockheed Martin and Saab Group.

“Government officials are now reviewing and analyzing information received to date to inform the way forward over the coming months,” a department spokesperson told the Star in an email.

A Boeing executive said his company is offering its F/A-18 Super Hornet as a “great fit” for Canada, saying the purchase and operating costs for its jet rank as among the lowest of its competitors

“With respect to capability, cost . . . we’ve really put a good offer on the table,” Jim Barnes, a Canadian development executive for Boeing Defense, Space and Security, said Friday.

Despite Lockheed Martin’s sales pitch that its F-35 is a more advanced and newer design, Barnes said the Boeing jet easily meets the needs of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

“I would argue that all capability you need is in the Super Hornet,” he said in an interview.

Lockheed Martin confirmed that its F-35 is also in the mix.

The F-35 has been dogged by controversy but company officials said the program has turned a corner, noting that the U.S. Air Force expects this year to declare the jet as “operational,” an important milestone that means the F-35 is ready to undertake missions.

The questionnaire demanded extensive details from the manufacturers. For example, it asked them to detail the cost of new weapons if the current stockpile of ammunition, missiles and bombs for the CF-18s is incompatible with their aircraft.

It also asked the jet makers to outline potential missions, notably in Canada’s north, flying from places such as Inuvik and Iqaluit.

The companies were also required to outline how they should share economic benefits with Canadian businesses.

Defence analyst Dave Perry of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute said the aerospace firms were given a very narrow window to respond to a complex request, suggesting the government is in a hurry to find a fix for the aging fighters.

“It was a crazy request in a crazy time frame . . . It’s a lot of stuff to ask for pretty quickly,” he said in an interview.

Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan has said that the air force is in a race against the clock. In June, he said that Canada faces a “capability gap”: as the aging jets reach the end of their lifespan, the air force may not have enough fighters to meet demands.

That was underscored in the note to the aerospace firms accompanying the questionnaire that said new jets are needed “as soon as possible so Canada can remain a credible and dependable ally.”

The previous Conservative government had originally announced its intention to buy F-35s in 2010, but then put that decision on hold in late 2012 after the auditor general flagged concerns about the potential price tag.

On the election trail last year, Trudeau vowed that a Liberal government would not buy the F-35 and would instead choose a less costly option to free up “tens of billions of dollars” that would be invested in the navy.

Since taking office, the Liberals have softened that hardline stance and suggested that the F-35 would be considered, even though Trudeau recently denounced the high-tech aircraft as unworkable.

The letter to the manufacturers said that no decision has been made and that “all procurement options are being considered.” It also stresses that the questionnaire is not a formal tender or request for proposals.

The CF-18s have been in service since the early 1980s, when the government had plans to only fly them for 20 years.

Modernization work has extended the life of 77 CF-18s and further work could keep them in the air until 2025 though the document warns that the fighters are “old and are running out of life.

“The reality is our fighters should have been replaced years ago,” the note reads. “As the existing fleet gets older, and aircraft are retired, the capability gap only gets worse.”

But picking a replacement jet proved contentious for the former Conservative government and it’s been troublesome for the Liberals, too.

There’s been speculation that the Liberals, keen to live up to their campaign pledge, may buy a batch of Super Hornets as a stopgap measure to ease pressure on the fleet but also buy the government some time.

Perry is hopeful that the selection process isn’t unfairly skewed toward Boeing.

“I hope they haven’t ruled out anyone — and before doing this, aren’t heavily favouring anyone — and just pick whatever provides the best return for the dollar,” he said.

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