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REFUELING TANKER PROGRAM

Ms. CANTWELL. Madam President, I come to the floor this afternoon to join my colleague from Washington State to talk about--I actually say it is an energy issue. Yes, it is also about the Air Force and Department of Defense air refueling tanker program, but I believe it fits well into this debate today because we are talking about energy and the high cost of energy.

This week, I am sending a letter to Secretary Gates, along with my colleague, Senator Murray, to make sure the Pentagon is doing its job and eliminating the evaluation errors identified by the GAO to make sure we have a fair competition and an even playing field when it comes to the air refueling tanker program.

The fact is, our military's air refueling requirements are already well known. The original requirements were developed with input from the warfighting combatant commanders and approved by the Air Force Requirements Oversight Council and the Joint Oversight Requirements Council. According to the Federal rules, major changes to these requirements cannot be made without going through this process again.

I think failing to account for what are full life-cycle costs and estimates or changing the requirements in the RFP would be another colossal failure in this long process. This was an evaluation problem, not an RFP problem. I am here to say that if the Pentagon fails to learn the lessons from the GAO decision and changes the requirements that have already been set, then I am sure they will hear from many of my colleagues and myself here in Congress. There may even be another GAO protest.

The American people do not want to have an amended RFP that will result in a protracted protest rather than the tanker procurement we are all seeking. Therefore, the new competition should be based on the requirements that were reflected in the original Request for Proposal dated January 29, 2007. The world our warfighters are operating in has not changed since those requirements were set. I see no need for them to be changed.

We are here on the floor now talking about the high cost of energy. The Boeing Company worked hard to meet the Air Force requirements for the tanker bid process. It picked the 767, the platform that best matched those Air Force requirements. If the Air Force had called for a larger tanker, Boeing could have offered a bigger plane, the 777, with far more fuel capacity. But the plane that Boeing picked, the 767, is a much better match for us, the American taxpayer, and for our environment.

The Air Force currently uses more fuel than any other branch of the military, and the Boeing 767 plane burns 24 percent less fuel than its competitor and would have saved the taxpayers approximately \$30 billion over the life of these tanker planes.

As my colleagues are talking about what to do about the high cost of fuel, I ask them to consider one of the Government's largest users of fuel--the Air Force --and whether we should make sure fuel efficiency is integrated into the Air Force's procurement decisions.

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The Air Force uses more than half of all the fuel the U.S. Government consumes each year, and aviation fuel accounts for more than 80 percent of the Air Force's total energy budget. In 2006, the service spent more than \$5.8 billion for almost 2.6 billion gallons of jet fuel--more than twice what it did in 2007.

The American taxpayers obviously cannot afford their own higher fuel costs. I do not see how the American taxpayers can afford the U.S. Air Force running up a higher cost energy bill as well.

An Air Force Assistant Secretary told the House Armed Services Committee that it wants to leave a greener footprint, with more environmentally sound energy resources. He testified that the rising gas and oil prices had forced the Air Force to take a harder look at the budget to find ways to save money while maintaining a high operations tempo in the war on terrorism.

Assistant Secretary Bill Anderson said this:

The increasing cost of energy and the Nation's commitment to reducing its dependence on foreign oil have led to the development of the Air Force energy strategy, to reduce demand, increase the supply and change the culture within the Air Force so that energy is considered in everything that we do.

I believe the Boeing 767 would have been a much better choice for the Air Force in energy savings and fuel efficiency. As I said, it burns 24 percent less fuel than the alternative that was put on the table. The Air Force did not give full consideration to the national security impact of these fuel efficiency issues when it made its decision on the tanker.

Given that the Air Force, as I said, uses more than half of all of the fuel the U.S. Government consumes, I hope they are thinking about the big picture issue when it comes to making sure our Nation reduces its dependence on foreign oil.

This 767 has greater operational flexibility. It can land on shorter runways and it can be based at more locations worldwide with existing infrastructure instead of making us, the taxpayer, pay for more and more infrastructure costs.

Boeing's medium-sized 767 tanker makes a lot more sense than the oversized option that was originally outlined by Northrop Grumman/EADS, and its greater operational flexibility.

The tanker size was determined in the original requirements. And so the fact this plane, the 767, is more fuel efficient, can land on shorter runways, can have more base operations, in fact, over 1,000 more base operations worldwide, and the fact that the other costs to the taxpayers in the long run are lower compared to the other offer the Air Force is considering, we must make sure we are doing our job here on the floor of the Senate to make sure these issues of cost savings to the taxpayer are considered.

I want to make sure the Department of Defense takes a hard look at these issues and weighs the loss of critical skills in the U.S. manufacturing base. In this time of challenge, America wants to know it can rely on a workforce and manufacturing base here in the United States for our preparedness for whatever conflict comes in the future.

I want to make sure that the problems identified by the Government Accountability Office are corrected and that we move forward. But failing to account for lifecycle costs on fuel, on infrastructure, on maintenance would also be another failure in this process.

I hope my colleagues will remember this was an evaluation problem, not the RFP. And we hope we will straighten this out as we move forward.

I see I am joined on the floor by my colleague, the senior Senator from Washington. I hope she too can add to the focus of how those high costs are something we should be considering in making sure the Air Force moves forward on the appropriations choice to give the men and women of our country a long overdue air refueling tanker that we deserve.

I yield the floor.