

Army cancels FARA helicopter program

By Ashley Roque, Senior Report, Breaking Defense 08 February 2024



digital rendering shows the Bell 360 Invictus in flight.

WASHINGTON — The US Army is cancelling its next generation Future Attack Reconnaissance Aircraft (FARA) program, service officials announced today, taking a potential multi-billion-dollar contract off the table and throwing the service’s long-term aviation plans into doubt.

In addition, the Army plans to end production on the [UH-60 V Black Hawk](#) in fiscal 2025, due to “significant cost growth,” keep General Electric’s Improved Turbine Engine Program ([ITEP](#)) in the development phase instead of moving it into production, and phase the Shadow and Raven unmanned aerial systems out of the fleet, the service added.

All told, it reflects a massive shift in the Army’s aviation strategy and upends years of planning. There is also an ironic sense of history repeating: the decision to end FARA [comes two decades to the month](#) after the Army ended its plans to procure the RAH-66 Comanche and nearly 16 years after it terminated work on the ARH-70A Arapaho, both aircraft designed to replace the Kiowa — the same helicopter FARA was supposed to, finally, replace.

The reason for ending FARA, Army leaders told a small group of reporters

ahead of the announcement, is a reflection of what war looks like in the modern era.

“We absolutely are paying attention [to world events] and adjusting, because we could go to war tonight, this weekend,” head of Army Futures Command Gen. James Rainey told reporters at the Pentagon on Thursday.

“We are learning from the battlefield — especially Ukraine — that aerial reconnaissance has fundamentally changed,” Army Chief Gen. Randy George said in a press release. “Sensors and weapons mounted on a variety of unmanned systems and in space are more ubiquitous, further reaching and more inexpensive than ever before.”

Although industry was planning for a Kiowa replacement for years, the program officially kicked off in 2018 with five competitors, which in 2020 were downselected to two: Bell-Textron with the 360 Invictus and Sikorsky with its Raider X.

While observations from places like Ukraine and Gaza are part of the impetus for FARA’s cancellation, the need to free up billions of dollars to invest in unmanned systems was also a prime factor, Rainey and other aviation leaders explained.

So the tentative plan, if Congress approves a fiscal 2024 spending bill with FARA dollars in it, is to keep FARA development going this year, in part to protect the industrial base and continue testing, Army acquisition head Doug Bush said. However, come Oct. 1 when FY25 kicks off, the FARA development will come to an end — if the service gets its way, as Congress will have to weigh in.

Although the Army still has a requirement for a FARA-like capability, Rainey said the service does not plan to kickstart another manned Kiowa replacement effort like it has done in the past. Instead, it will invest elsewhere, especially on the unmanned side, to fulfill the Kiowa’s role as an armed scout operating ahead of other units in war zones.

Just what those final investments will look like will take time to emerge, but Bush said the service plans to use a portion of the billions of dollars freed up, to invest in four spots inside the aviation portfolio.

- Ink a new multi-year procurement deal with Lockheed-Sikorsky for the UH-60M Blackhawk line.
- Give Boeing the greenlight to formally begin production on the CH-47F Block II Chinook.
- Continue Future Long-Range Assault Aircraft (FLRAA) development as planned.
- Additional investments for developing and buying unmanned aerial

reconnaissance systems like the future tactical unmanned systems and launched effects.

“The Army is deeply committed to our aviation portfolio and to our partners in the aviation industrial base,” service Secretary Christine Wormuth wrote in a press release. “These steps enable us to work with industry to deliver critical capabilities as part of the joint force, place the Army on a sustainable strategic path, and continue the Army’s broader modernization plan which is the service’s most significant modernization effort in more than four decades.”

Saying FARA-Well To Long Term Plans

Fallout from the Army’s new plan will likely be swift from both Capitol Hill, the industry and analysts – all stakeholders the Army needs to win over in order to, keep their FY24 request intact and change course in FY25.

“We are hoping that we can retain all of that [FY24] funding where it resides to allow us to do these transitions from current efforts to new ones in an orderly way,” Bush said. “That also helps protect the workforce.”

Rep. Rob Wittman, R-Va., vice chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and chairman of the Tactical Air and Land Forces (TAL) Subcommittee, issued a first reaction to the decisions saying it requires “serious scrutiny” from Congress.

“To better assess the administration’s proposal to terminate these aviation programs and divest legacy platforms, I plan to hold a hearing this spring on Army aviation rebalancing, the path forward, and the health of the industrial base,” he wrote in a statement.

On the industry side, Bell and Sikorsky have spent years and a large number of their own dollars working on the prototypes, while GE has worked on the long- [delayed ITEP](#). Both prototype helos were slated for first flight this year but it is now unclear if or when they will ever get there.

From Sikorsky’s vantage point, the company said today that it remains committed to its prototype, the X2, “disappointed” with the Army’s decision and awaiting a debrief to better understand that choice. In an emailed statement to Breaking Defense, a Bell spokesperson said that although the

company is also “disappointed,” it will “apply the knowledge and demonstrated successes of our FARA development efforts on future aircraft.”

While Army leaders did not provide reporters with in-depth insights into their decision making process that shaped the new plan, Bush didn’t blame the FARA cancellation on runaway costs or technology challenge. Instead, he emphasized that the decision comes in the wake of a newly completed analysis of alternatives (AOA), a review some inside Congress, including Wittman, said should have happened earlier.

“I plan on reviewing how the Army plans to address the service’s aviation attack and reconnaissance mission-set without FARA, expended funds, vision for future investments, and how the AOA informed this decision,” Wittman wrote. “The Army must expediate delivery of this document to Congress to inform our work in the FY25 [authorization] and appropriations bills.”

While Bell and Sikorsy are now both unable to secure a FARA production deal, the Army did make sure to give industrial support to both firms in the reworked plan.

For example, the plan to end the UH-60V Black Hawk upgrade program (which includes installation of a new digital cockpit) in FY25 would seem a blow to Sikorsky. However, freed up dollars from the larger aviation decision can now be used to ink a new multi-year UH-60M procurement deal that would carry production beyond FY26, Bush said. (So far, the National Guard has received 60 of those helos, with more coming this year, but going forward that component will instead receive UH-60M Black Hawks.)

Questions about the fate of the UH-60 line mushroomed last year when the service picked Bell’s [V-280 Valor](#) for its multi-billion-dollar Future Long-Range Assault Aircraft program. And while Bell will now miss its chance to win FARA, Bush’s statement that some of the money freed up will go towards FLARA should ease concerns.

A third industrial player, Boeing, is also set for a much needed win with Bush announcing that the service plans to formally begin production on the CH-47F Block II Chinook, a move coming roughly five years after the service put the brakes on buying [that configuration](#). In the interim years, lawmakers have repeatedly added unrequested funds into the budget for the service to purchase those helicopters.

Power Up

As for the engine slated to power FARA, the service isn't pulling the plug on it right now – but it is slowing it down.

The T901 Improved Turbine Engine is meant to have [50 percent more horsepower and 25 percent better fuel efficiency](#), and will also replace some of the Army's legacy powerplants. All AH-64E Apaches and UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters, currently powered by the T700 engine that first started flying Black Hawks in the 1970s, have been planned to have those engines swapped out for the T901, according to the Army.

But delivery of the T901 powerplants, developed by GE Aerospace, was delayed as the engine maker wrestled with supply chain disruptions. Late last year the service accepted two engines and they were sent on to both FARA competitors.

Brig. Gen. David Phillips, the Program Executive Officer for Aviation, on Thursday said the service has now received six more ITEPs, with another two slated to arrive in May and head to Black Hawk line.

“All that is on track, we're learning from all that effort and we're really putting all that learning to use and how we're thinking about integrating it in Apache, how we're thinking about integrating it in Black Hawk long term,” the one-star general said. “Then really thinking carefully about the transition to production because we have had challenges in that development phase was some of those very unique pieces and parts and manufacturing.”

“As we go toward production, we want to make sure we get that right,” he added.

Unmanned Focus

While FARA may be dead, Army leaders still envision a future with aviators in a cockpit, at least for now. But in the short term, they need to spend more on unmanned capabilities.

“Indisputably the requirement to conduct reconnaissance and security is a

valid and remaining requirement. It's not going anywhere," Rainey said.

"The requirement to be able to conduct reconnaissance and security is still absolutely valid," he later added. "Just how to do it, and how much risk to accept [and] ... the future is going to be about who can properly integrate humans and machines effectively."

For now, that future will not include the legacy Shadow and Raven unmanned aerial systems. Instead the Army wants to funnel dollars toward future tactical unmanned systems. In [September 2023](#), the service selected Griffon Aerospace and Textron Systems to move ahead with the second phase of the FTUAS Increment 2 competition, the RQ-7B Shadow replacement.

If all goes as planned, the service wants to have these prototypes in users hands in early FY25, receive feedback and make a contract award in time for production to begin the following year, Phillips said.

It is also moving ahead with a ["launched effects"](#) portfolio — small drones that shoot out of something else mid-flight. The service is eyeing three versions for now — one that is short-range, medium-range and long-range.

When it comes to the short-range version, Phillips said the service hosted an industry day this week and the goal is to make an award in early FY25.