

Lockheed Martin F-35 Sustainment Woes Hurting Readiness

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File photo

The U.S. Defense Department's new fleet of Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning IIs is experiencing spare parts shortages and other sustainment problems that are hurting the readiness of the fighter jets, according to a report released Oct. 26 by the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

The GAO, in its report to Congress, said despite the various benefits of the aircraft, "DOD is facing several key sustainment challenges that pose risks to its ability to meet current and future warfighter readiness requirements, and these could limit the ability of the military services to fully leverage the capabilities of the aircraft."

Due to the parts shortages, F-35s could not fly 22% of the time from January through Aug. 7 — more than double the Defense Department's goal of 10%, the GAO found. In addition, due to delays in standing up repair capabilities at depots, it takes an average of 172 days to fix a part, or about twice the program's goal.

"According to program office and contractor officials, the shortages of spare parts are due in part to the delays in the establishment of depot repair capabilities, incomplete plans and funding that did not account for the long lead time for parts, insufficient amounts of service funding and poor reliability of certain parts," the GAO wrote.

Another challenge the GAO identified is that the U.S. Marine Corps and possibly the U.S. Navy will not have adequate maintenance capabilities on ships during their initial F-35 deployments at sea in 2018 and 2021, respectively.

Furthermore, updates to the Autonomic Logistics Information System (ALIS) will likely be delayed, and the system's development is not fully funded, the GAO said. ALIS provides aircraft health and maintenance action information.

In response to a draft of the report, Kristin French, principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for logistics and materiel readiness, wrote that the Defense Department is revising its F-35 sustainment plans, including costs and funding, to address the challenges that the GAO outlined. Changes to those plans could be reflected in the department's fiscal year 2019 budget request, due out in early calendar year 2018.

U.S. Defense is sustaining more than 250 F-35s and plans to triple that figure by the end of 2021. Ultimately, the department plans to buy 2,443 jets for the Air Force, Marine Corps and Navy.

F-35 sustainment for the three services is expected to cost \$1.12 trillion over 60 years. A Pentagon official recently indicated that the Defense Department is launching a year-long "deep dive" to look for ways to cut the cost of the jet's production and sustainment.