

## U.S. Navy Shrugs Off Northrop's MQ-25 Snub

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***The U.S. Navy wants 72 MQ-25 Stingray UAVs, but will only order four aircraft initially as part of the engineering and manufacturing development phase. Boeing***

NAS PATUXENT RIVER, Maryland—Northrop Grumman's departure from the U.S. Navy's MQ-25 Stingray competition hasn't fazed Naval Air Systems Command (Navair), the organization in charge of acquiring up to 72 carrier-based unmanned tankers.

Rear Adm. Mark Darrah, program executive officer for unmanned aviation and strike weapons at Navair, says, "It's their decision," and Northrop continues to support the program under a contract for concept refinement that runs through March 2018.

"We're going to move forward with our strategy," Darrah said during an interview with Aviation Week at Navair's headquarters at Patuxent River here. "We've got a very robust request for proposals [RFP] and feel we're in a good position with whoever remains behind to give us a proposal."

Boeing, Lockheed Martin and General Atomics Aeronautical Systems are still in the hunt for the multibillion-dollar program. The RFP was released Oct. 4, and proposals are due by Jan. 3, 2018.

Northrop would have been a leading contender had the Navy not switched focus from a carrier-based unmanned surveillance and strike aircraft to an aerial refueling platform for topping-up strike fighters.

The company had developed, delivered and flown two prototype X-47B aircraft in support of the former Unmanned Carrier-Launched Airborne Surveillance and Strike program, but seemed to lose enthusiasm when the Navy instead asked for an MQ-25 tanker to be developed on a fixed-price incentive contract.

Northrop CEO Wes Bush announced the company's withdrawal on Oct. 25 during an earnings call, saying, "We could not put forward an attractive proposition to the Navy that would represent a reasonable business case for our company."

Darrah confirms that a down-select to one vendor for MQ-25 is expected by late summer 2018.

The development contract will deliver four aircraft for testing and evaluation. The winner must then prove themselves by delivering the promised capability on time and on budget. If successful, they could receive follow-on contracts for the production phase.

Darrah says the program of record calls for 72 aircraft capable of operating from Nimitz or Ford-class carriers.

"We want to go as fast as we can and get them out there as quickly as we can. We're incentivizing [the contractor] to do well in the engineering and manufacturing development phase," he says.

The only two key performance parameters are carrier integration and mission tanking. To qualify, the proposed aircraft must be capable of offloading 14,000 lb. of gas starting at 500 mi. from the carrier.

The Navy says all other design attributes are "trade space" that can be exchanged for greater performance or lower costs in other areas. Secondary attributes previously being considered, like 12 hr. of endurance, were removed. No new development is planned for this aircraft, just integration of mature, existing capabilities, including the government-furnished aerial refueling system (ARS), or buddy store.

The MQ-25 will carry an electro-optical/infrared sensor ball and have space, weight, power and cooling provisions for a potential maritime surveillance radar.

Instead of specifying how many MQ-25s will embark at a time, the Navy has told contractors how many refueling "hoses" it needs for carrier operations.

The service also has provided contractors with a "spot factor" value, the maximum amount of real estate their platform can occupy on the carrier deck, including peculiar support equipment.

Darrah says many of the competitors are already working on advanced prototypes, including flying and non-flying test articles. Based on what the contractors may or may not have already shown the Navy already, he teased that people might see something flying sooner than expected after contract award.

Darrah says the tanker will not carry weapons, but future carrier-based drones might. The purpose of the MQ-25, he says, is to develop an aircraft optimized for tanking that will extend the operational range of the carrier air wing and free up Boeing F/A-18E/F Super Hornets for combat missions.

"We want an aircraft design from the start to do that mission," Darrah says. "It's about utilizing aircraft in a more efficient way."