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Tucson's D-M, Raytheon stand to benefit from defense spending spree

By David Wichner Arizona Daily Star Dec 9, 2017 Updated Dec 10, 2017



Davis-Monthan is home to a combat squadron of A-10 "Warthogs" — an aircraft the Air Force has been trying to retire.

Air Force

Davis-Monthan Air Force Base's A-10 ground-attack planes will fly on, Arizona military installations will see new investment and Tucson-based Raytheon Missile Systems will make more missiles under pending versions of the 2018 defense budget.

There's a chance that could change, since Congress must act to raise budget-control caps in order to spend the nearly \$700 billion in defense spending authorized under the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) passed and sent to the president in mid-November.

Last week, Congress passed a continuing resolution to continue defense funding for a few months, but lawmakers still must pass an annual defense spending bill.

Barring a failure to adjust the budget caps or an unexpected about-face on the NDAA, the Tucson region's interests are well-served under the pending act and a defense appropriations bill passed by the House, said U.S. Rep. Martha McSally, R-Tucson.

Though the Senate has yet to pass an appropriations bill, the A-10 and other support for local military missions is written into both chambers' versions of the NDAA and the House appropriations bill, said McSally, a former A-10 pilot who sits on the House Armed Services Committee.

"We've got it in three of the four bills, so we feel pretty good," said McSally. "It's a good deal for our troops, it's a good deal for Southern Arizona — this is actually good news from Washington," she said, also highlighting a 2.4 percent across-the-board pay raise for service members.

The head of the DM50, a local group that supports D-M, said the budget support is encouraging. Air Force plans to retire the A-10 — the local air base's biggest mission — and to make other cuts have caused local leaders to worry in recent years that D-M might face closure if its missions were diminished.

D-M has an estimated annual economic impact of nearly \$1 billion, according to studies by the base.

"We're feeling very good about the current missions," said Bryan Foulk, a Tucson dentist and chairman of the DM50, crediting support from McSally, Sen. John McCain and other members of the state's congressional delegation. "They've really done a great job of keeping the Arizona bases growing."

Meanwhile, there is no imminent prospect of any major base closures, though McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Sen. Jack Reed floated the idea of a modified base-closing process to address a surplus of military installations.

But Congress has denied the Pentagon's requests for a new base realignment and closure, or BRAC, round since the last round in 2005, and the McCain-Reed amendment didn't make it into the version of the NDAA sent to President Trump.

"I don't think it's going to go forward this year, but it's gaining traction," Foulk said.

MOVING MONEY

The budget battle isn't over yet, though.

While congressional budget writers haggle over the total defense budget, appropriations committees are at work on the individual spending bills, which are generally guided by the NDAA.

The NDAA calls for fully funding nine squadrons of 283 A-10s and keeping 171 "combat-coded," or ready for battle, McSally said. D-M is home to one A-10 combat squadron, an active-duty training squadron and an Air Force Reserve training unit.

The defense appropriations bill passed by the House includes \$103 million to complete wing replacements on 110 A-10 Thunderbolt II jets.

The Air Force had been trying to retire the A-10 "Warhog" for budget reasons beginning in 2019 but has extended that date to 2022 amid resistance in Congress and high demand for the plane, a slow-flying, Cold War-era tank killer that excels at close air support of ground troops.

The rewinging and other upgrades would keep the A-10 flying into the 2030s, despite concerns voiced by senior Air Force officials that some planes may run out of service hours and be grounded before they can get new wings.

McSally said the Air Force has enough wiggle room in its budget to avoid that problem, and it must do so to keep enough A-10s amid continual deployments.

A-10s have dropped 20 percent of the munitions used against Islamic State militants and have been deployed to Europe and South Korea for exercises as tensions have mounted with Russia and North Korea, McSally said.

"We're just holding the line right now," she said. "They can move some things around a little to keep them flying."

The House appropriations bill also includes \$17.5 million for non-wing upgrades and \$6 million for safety testing, McSally added.

NEW COMPASS CALL

The pending defense legislation also fully funds the operations of the 55th Electronic Combat Group based at D-M, which operates EC-130H Compass Call electronic warfare planes that have been continually deployed for jamming and surveillance operations in the Middle East since 2002.

The Air Force proposed retiring about half of the aging Compass Call jamming planes — based solely at D-M — by 2019, but Congress stepped in and halted the plan.

In September, the Air Force awarded a contract to L3 Communications, the main Compass Call aircraft integrator maintenance contractor, to fit the EC-130H jamming equipment on a new plane in a process known as “cross-decking.”

L3 was given the power to choose the new platform, and it chose the Gulfstream’s G550 business jet, which has been adapted as an early-warning radar platform.

McSally said she backed the Air Force’s decision to let L3 choose the aircraft to host the Compass Call mission, though giving the contractor that leeway resulted in an unsuccessful challenge from Gulfstream competitor Boeing.

“That was a very innovative approach that I supported,” she said.

The good news is, D-M will likely still host the Compass Call mission when the new plane is ready, which could take several years. The 55th Electronic Combat Group has a force of more than 800 airmen.

“They’re staying here, for sure,” McSally said, citing “multiple conversations” with military leaders on the issue.

RAYTHEON CASHES IN

Raytheon, the world’s biggest missile maker, also will see increased orders for Tomahawk cruise missiles, Sidewinder and AMRAAM air-to-air missiles, and other weapon systems, totaling more than \$1.5 billion under the pending defense legislation.

The NDAA includes \$12.3 billion for missile defense, about \$4 billion more than the Trump administration’s initial request after the president asked for the increase in November to help counter the missile threat from North Korea.

Raytheon Missile Systems, Southern Arizona’s largest private employer, makes the Standard Missile-3 and SM-6 interceptors for the sea-based Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense system and the kill vehicle for the Ground-based Midcourse Defense system.

The NDAA also authorizes \$705 million for Israeli cooperative missile defense programs involving Raytheon — \$558.5 million more than the administration’s request.

Raytheon divisions elsewhere make some missiles for the Patriot system, and radar and control systems for several missile-defense programs that also are in line for budget boosts.

Among other Southern Arizona defense priorities, the pending NDAA includes:

- \$22 million for construction of a general-instruction building at D-M;

- Full funding for the missions at the U.S. Army Intelligence Center and Fort Huachuca in Sierra Vista, with increased personnel funding and more funding for research, development and testing;
- \$30 million for a ground-transport equipment building at Fort Huachuca;
- And \$36.4 million for an enlisted dining facility and community buildings at Marine Corps Air Station, Yuma.

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