

Talking tanker

Boeing gears up for U.S. Air Force tanker competition

By Stacey Holloway

Rick Lemaster is the man at the center of one of Boeing's largest and most talked about campaigns. He's program manager for the KC-X tanker. With the U.S. Department of Defense release of its draft request for proposal (RFP) for the KC-X imminent, and contract award expected next summer, *Frontiers* spoke with Lemaster about the program and its future.

What is the KC-X program?

The Department of Defense is moving forward with the KC-X competition, with plans to purchase 179 new aerial refueling tanker aircraft in the first of several measures to replace the 415 Boeing KC-135 Stratotankers in inventory. Based on our previous competition, we are preparing for a firm proposal that comprises 179 aircraft or 15 tankers a year, for 12 years. There also is a follow-on buy, called KC-Y, that could bring the order potential to 400 airplanes.

Can you tell readers what the people in the program are currently working on?

We are working at a feverish pace in order to get ready for this next competition. At this point, we do not know what the U.S. Air Force customer is going to want. But I can tell you that Boeing has the best range of options out there. If our customer wants the medium-sized aircraft, we have an excellent, state-of-the-art 767 airplane. If they want a larger airplane, we have our 777, which is bigger and better than our competitor's aircraft. We are

getting ready to make both of those offers to the Air Force depending on what the RFP states they value in an aircraft. Currently, we are refining our 767 offer, defining the 777 configuration, aligning our suppliers and partners, and making sure we have a good understanding of what the technical requirements need to be so that we are ready to write the proposal and deliver it in a short period of time.

This is the third time that Boeing has pursued this program. What do you think is different about this competition, both for the U.S. Air Force and for Boeing?

The environment is different. This time around everyone is being very, very careful. As I said before, the focus is on what the Air Force values in its tanker capability, and that is going to drive what we offer and how this whole competition proceeds. There is a lot of uncertainty associated with it right now and we don't really know what they are going to put on the street with the RFP, so we are preparing for everything.

There has been a lot of news surrounding Boeing's KC-7A7 concept. Can you describe what that is and why we're using it?

The 7A7 speaks to our range of options that we can offer to the Air Force customer based on its requirements. The 7A7 is what we'll call our KC-X offer. The "A" between the two 7s stands for Ability—Boeing's experience at building and modifying tankers ... more than 2,000



PHOTOS: Rick Lemaster, shown in his St. Louis office, leads the KC-X campaign for Boeing. **RICHARD RAU/BOEING**

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of them. It stands for Advanced—our next tanker will have the most modern equipment and design features that our warfighters need today. It stands for Available—Boeing is delivering 21st-century tankers and they are in operational service today. And it stands for Agility—a tanker that can operate around the world in any airspace, in harm’s way, while refueling any receiver, anytime, anywhere.

What is the advantage of offering a 767-based tanker? How about a 777-based tanker?

The 767’s footprint is only a little larger than the KC-135, but it provides a twin-aisle capability. The 777 is much bigger than the KC-135 aircraft in terms of its overall size, meaning you can carry or offload more fuel. It is only slightly larger than the competitor’s aircraft, but the 777 provides significantly increased fuel offload. It also provides better payload capability in terms of both passengers and cargo.

On a military base or an airfield within the area of military operations, you are concerned with how you flow the aircraft in and out to accomplish the mission. If I have a limited amount of aircraft available because I have fewer large aircraft parked on the ground, it takes me longer to cycle aircraft in and out, which means that they are not flying, delivering cargo or delivering passengers or fuel. Having more, smaller 767s flying allows more receiver aircraft to get the fuel and continue to execute their missions, effectively putting more gas available at more locations in the sky.

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A criticism we have heard about the 767 is that it is an old airplane at the end of its production life. However, one of the things people may not know is that we are going to be making changes to the 767. We are going to put a digital cockpit into the airplane so it is every bit as advanced as what we are putting into the 777 or 787. This will not be the same 767 described several years ago. We also are leveraging the successes we’ve had with our international tanker programs, which are based on 767 platforms. The Japanese tankers achieved initial operational capability earlier this year, and we are getting ready to deliver tankers to the Italians.

We expect the competitor will continue to offer their bigger airplane and argue for changes in the concept of operations that take advantage of its ability to carry more fuel and be able to stay in the air longer.

So it really comes down to what the Air Force wants. If the Air Force really does value a larger airplane, we have a great one in the 777. If they want something that is more along the lines of what they traditionally valued as a replacement for the KC-135, we have a great one of those, too, in the 767. Once the design and build properties for the KC-X 7A7 are finished, it will be the very best tanker aircraft ever built.

When will Boeing make the decision whether to offer a single platform or both the 777 and 767?

We are hopeful that when the RFP is released that the Air Force will define their requirements in concrete terms, and then we will choose which of our aircraft makes the very best product for them. We do not want to be in the position of offering two proposals.



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GRAPHIC: Both of Boeing’s potential KC-X tanker offerings are showcased in this artist’s concept of a 767 Tanker (top) preparing to refuel a 777-based tanker.
CHUCK SCHROEDER/BOEING

When will you make an announcement regarding the aircraft decision?

We will make the announcement at the right time, which is based on our desire to preserve our competitive advantage. I believe it will be at the time we submit our proposal.

How are we leveraging the power of “One Boeing” to ensure a successful outcome?

We have really embraced the One Boeing concept. We are taking it further and trying to figure out even more ways to break down barriers between Integrated Defense Systems and Commercial Airplanes. For example, we are setting up a joint program office construct for employees that will not have an affiliation back with their home organizations.

We have a lot to do to try to work through our procedures and our processes to ensure we remain Boeing-compliant, but by doing so, this will allow us to work more effectively and efficiently than previous programs. And lastly, we are going to leverage some of the successes from commercial derivative programs like the U.S. Navy’s P-8A Poseidon and follow the path they have pioneered.

One other advantage we have is the passion of the Boeing people who are involved in this campaign. It really has been an emotional roller coaster ride for most of them, having worked so hard on the initial proposal, lived through the protest sustainment and now having a second chance to win this competition. I was

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fortunate in my last competition to work with a talented, dedicated crew in Philadelphia. You can't teach that passion and I'm really pleased to see it in the faces of the tanker people I'm working with here in St. Louis, in Everett, in Wichita, in Long Beach and around the company. Working together we can win this competition.

What are some of the lessons learned from the previous KC-X campaigns that Boeing is employing in the current competition?

The biggest thing we have learned over the course of the past three or four years is the importance of really listening to our customer. It is a fundamental concept, but you can easily lose sight of it when you are in the heat of a competition. We are listening to our Air Force customer and we are going to give them the product that we believe meets their requirements the best.

What do you see as our biggest challenge to winning the KC-X contract?

We are going into this with our eyes wide open and realize that this is going to be a very, very tough competition to win. We have to make sure that we have the absolute best price, lowest risk and best schedule we can offer to give the Air Force the very best airplane for the mission. ■

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PHOTO: Two Boeing KC-767J tankers are shown in formation flight in 2008 prior to delivery to the Japan Air Self-Defense Force. Boeing has delivered a third KC-767 to Japan and is building a fourth. ROBERT SHADY/BOEING