

# Ottawa to Spend up to \$477M on U.S. Military Satellites

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OTTAWA — The federal government is planning to spend as much as \$477-million to participate in a U.S.-led military satellite program that has been subject to delays and cost overruns over the past decade, Postmedia News has learned.

The Wideband Global Satellite system has been advertised by the U.S. Defense Department as a communications system for “U.S. warfighters, allies and coalition partners during all levels of conflict, short of nuclear war.”

The idea is to have as many as nine military satellites hovering over different parts of the world, ready to provide high-frequency bandwidth for U.S. and allied forces wherever they may be operating.

Daniel Blouin, a spokesman for Canada’s Department of National Defence, said the Canadian Forces has identified improved communication capabilities as a necessity.

“After Afghanistan and Libya, our efforts in those two countries have proven that the exchange of information between headquarters and deployed elements is critical to modern military operations and their success,” Blouin said.

“So, in order to meet that intent while ensuring good value for taxpayer money, we’re seeking out an agreement with international allies that will provide Canadian forces with access to an international constellation of satellites.”

If Canada does join the Wideband Global Satellite System, or WGS, it will be the latest ally to get onboard the project.

Australia agreed in 2007 to contribute more than \$800 million US to pay for the sixth satellite in return for a portion of the system’s overall bandwidth. New Zealand, Luxembourg, Denmark and the Netherlands also have expressed interest.

Several weeks ago, Cabinet gave Defence Minister Peter MacKay permission to pay up to \$477-million to ensure Canadian participation.

Blouin would not say what type of agreement Canada is pursuing as negotiations are still underway. However, he said the \$477-million would be paid over a number of years.

“We’re not looking for access to military communications for a single year. That’s not in our best interests,” he said. “We’re looking for long-term planning to meet the needs of the Canadian Forces.”

The federal government is looking to create a two-satellite system over the Arctic to provide Canada with improved military communication services and aid in defence operations.

Blouin said the Polar Communications and Weather Mission may complement the WGS, which does not cover the High Arctic, but the two systems are separate.

The U.S. military's intention to secure allied participation in the WGS is no secret.

"Our close ally Australia has bought into the system, and the [U.S.] Air Force is in the final phases of developing similar arrangements with several other allies," Gregory Schulte, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for space policy, told a conference in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 4.

"This approach has increased the size and capacity of the constellation. Internationalizing WGS also complicates the calculations of any country contemplating an attack on the system."

The project, however, has not been without its share of problems. In fact, the WGS has been identified alongside the F-35 joint strike fighter over the years as having serious issues.

When the U.S. military announced in January 2001 that Boeing would lead the project, the plan was to build a system of between three and six satellites over 10 years.

The first satellite was to be launched in 2004, and if all six were built the total cost was to be \$1.3 billion US.

But according to a U.S. government report from this year, manufacturing and quality control issues plagued the first three satellites. These included problems with an antenna array, incorrectly installed rivet nuts, and poor soldering.

As a result, the first satellite wasn't launched until October 2007 and didn't become operational over the Pacific Ocean until April 2008.

The second satellite, positioned over the Middle East and Afghanistan, was declared operational in June 2009 and the third, placed over the Atlantic Ocean, in March 2010.

In addition, "due to limited resources and other priorities, the contract options for satellites 4-6 were not exercised before they expired," reads a U.S. Defense Department assessment from April 2010.

For that reason, the fourth satellite isn't expected to be operational until 2013, and a further two-year delay is expected between the sixth and seventh satellites.

The assessment also says the cost per satellite has increased 27.2 per cent, and the overall project is 39.5 per cent above budget projections.

"Following the acquisition of (the first three satellites), the commercial communication satellite market took a significant downturn," the assessment states, adding that key components were no longer commercially available.

Senior U.S. air force officials also warned in testimony to Congress on March 31 that difficulties in securing a contract for the seventh satellite would increase the project's costs.

The program is now expected to cost more than \$3.5 billion US. The U.S. military has asked Congress for \$469 million US for the WGS for the coming fiscal year alone.

NDP defence critic David Christopherson was surprised to discover Canada was negotiating such an agreement with the U.S., and called for more transparency from the government.

“At first blush, the notion of improving military communications is not something the ordinary person would be opposed to,” he said. “But why wasn’t there more transparency? Where is the accountability on this?”

Christopherson noted another U.S.-led project Canada has signed onto, the F-35 stealth jet, has been plagued with controversy and problems, and he worried the results may be the same with the WGS.

Liberal defence critic John McKay said he was worried about handing too much control over Canadian capabilities to the U.S.

“The thing that comes to mind immediately is the vulnerabilities that come with sharing your sovereignty with the Americans, which is essentially what you’re doing,” he said.

By participating in such a program, he said, there’s a risk of making Canada more likely to become involved in future U.S. military operations.

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