



February 16, 2024

Army Future Attack Reconnaissance Aircraft (FARA) Program Proposed Cancellation: Background and Issues for Congress

Introduction

On February 8, 2024, the U.S. Army announced, as part of a major proposed restructuring of its aviation programs, that it seeks to cancel the Future Attack Reconnaissance Aircraft (FARA) program in its FY2025 budget request. FARA is part of a larger Army effort to develop advanced technology platforms to improve its existing rotorcraft and replace the Army’s Boeing AH-64 Apache helicopters and Bell OH-58 Kiowa helicopters. The Army has proposed to continue funding research and development for FARA in FY2024. An issue facing Congress is whether to approve, reject, or modify the Army’s proposal to cancel the FARA program for FY2025.

Context for Announcement

The Army announced its intention to cancel the FARA program during a period of rapid proliferation of uncrewed aircraft and related technology. “We are learning from the battlefield, especially Ukraine, that aerial reconnaissance has fundamentally changed,” said Army Chief of Staff General Randy George, in announcing the proposal to cancel FARA.

Canceling FARA would be at least the fourth major change to Army aviation programs in the past 20 years. The service canceled three prior efforts to replace its attack or scout helicopters: the Comanche attack helicopter in 2004, the Armed Reconnaissance Helicopter in 2008, and the Armed Aerial Scout in 2014.

Along with its proposal to cancel the FARA program, the Army is also proposing to delay development of the engine that would power FARA, phase out the Army’s fleets of Shadow and Raven Unmanned Aerial Systems (UASs), modify its UH-60 helicopter procurement plans, and increase investment in the Future Long-range Assault Aircraft (FLRAA), the CH-47F Block II Chinook helicopter, and UASs.

Future Vertical Lift (FVL) Effort

The FARA program is a major component of a larger Army effort to modernize its aviation portfolio. The Army began that effort, called Future Vertical Lift (FVL), in 2009. Under FVL, the Army has sought to upgrade aviation assets that were originally developed in the 1960s and 1970s, including the Black Hawk medium-transport helicopter, the Apache attack aircraft, and the Kiowa Warrior scout helicopter.

FVL is focused on replacing Cold War-era aircraft with new rotorcraft that have improved technology, including a smaller logistical footprint and better maneuverability, payload capacity, range, reliability, speed, and

survivability. The Army funds development for FVL in its research and development account in Program Element (PE) 0603801A, Aviation Advanced Development.

The Army sought to field two key FVL platforms in the early 2030s: FARA and FLRAA. The FLRAA program, which is developing a replacement for the Black Hawk helicopter, is ongoing. The Army in 2022 awarded a \$1.3 billion contract to Bell Textron to deliver an FLRAA prototype based on the firm’s V-280 Valor tiltrotor aircraft to the Army by 2025. The Army says it anticipates equipping an initial unit with FLRAA aircraft by FY2030.

FARA Program Overview

The FARA program aims at developing a helicopter that can conduct armed reconnaissance and scouting missions for other aviation units with better performance, agility, and range than the older Army aircraft it would replace—the Boeing AH-64 Apache helicopter and the Bell OH-58 Kiowa helicopter. (The last OH-58s were retired in 2020.) The Army requested \$428.9 million in FY2024 research and development funding for the FARA program, and programmed about \$3.5 billion in additional research and development funding in FY2025-FY2028.

Table 1. U.S. Army’s FY2024 FARA Budget Request
(\$ in millions)

FY2025	FY2026	FY2027	FY2028	FY2025-FY2028 Total
657	755	1,054	1,066	3,532

Source: Justification Book (army.mil).

Note: The service indicated on February 8, 2024, that it will revise future spending plans in its upcoming FY2025 request.

Key design attributes for FARA include a maximum gross weight of 14,000 pounds, a 40-foot-diameter rotor, and the ability to fly at 180 knots (about 207 miles per hour) with a single engine, the General Electric Aerospace T901 Improved Turbine Engine Program (ITEP) powerplant.

Five firms or industry teams initially competed for the FARA program: AVX, teamed with L-3; Bell; Boeing; Karem Aircraft/Raytheon and Northrop Grumman; and Sikorsky. In 2020, the Army narrowed the competition to Bell and Sikorsky, awarding contracts to each firm to design, build, and test FARA prototypes. Sikorsky has been flying its FARA prototype, the S-97 Raider, since 2015. Bell said in June 2023 that it plans to fly its FARA prototype—the 360 Invictus—in 2024. Under its proposed

restructuring, the Army is proposing to complete FY2024 FARA prototyping activities before ending the FARA program.

In 2021, Army officials suggested that meeting FARA's requirements for speed, range, endurance, and payload at the aircraft's planned size could be difficult, if not impossible. Two years later, the Army announced that due to delays to the engine development effort, the FARA program would not begin engineering and manufacturing development until FY2026. The service at that time also said it was starting an analysis of alternatives (AOA) for the FARA program. An AOA is a formal analysis that is to be conducted prior to the start of an acquisition program to identify the best or most promising way to meet an identified mission need. At the time that the Army announced the FARA AOA, the service had already spent \$2 billion on the FARA program.

ITEP Engine

The Army had sought GE's T901 to not only power FARA but also serve as an improved engine for Apache and Black Hawk helicopters. GE was selected to develop the ITEP engine in 2019. GE says that compared with the prior engine in the series, the GE T700, the T901 would increase power by 50% and be 25% more fuel efficient.

The ITEP program was originally scheduled to deliver a prototype for the two FARA competitors by the end of 2022, but the delivery date was delayed until the spring of 2023, and then again to early 2024. Under the Army's proposed restructuring, the ITEP effort would be further slowed, but the engine would still be integrated into Apache and Black Hawk helicopters. The Army requested \$201 million in FY2024 research and development funding for the ITEP program. Versions of House and Senate appropriations bills would fully fund ITEP.

Other Elements of Proposed Restructuring

Other elements of the Army's proposed restructuring of its aviation programs include the following.

UH-60

The Army intends to stop procuring UH-60V Black Hawks due to cost growth and instead seek a new multiyear procurement of the UH-60M, the prior most advanced Black Hawk variant.

CH-47F Block II

The Army proposes to use savings from the proposed FARA cancellation for continued procurement of Boeing CH-47F Block II helicopters, which transport troops and supplies, resupply weapons and equipment, and conduct other cargo operations. The service says the change would put the Block II Chinook on a path to full-rate production.

FTUAS and Air Launched Effects

To accelerate introduction of UASs into the Army, the service aims to increase investment in its Future Tactical Unmanned Aircraft System (FTUAS) program, its Launched Effects effort, and its commercial small UAS

efforts. FTUAS is a planned replacement for the Army's AAI RQ-7B Shadow UAS. In the fall of 2023, the Army awarded contracts to design and build FTUAS prototypes to Griffon Aerospace for its Valiant UAS and Textron Systems for its Aerosonde Mk. 4.8 Hybrid Quad UAS. FTUASs are expected to penetrate highly defended areas by using launched effects, which are small drones that can be launched by other aircraft.

Issues for Congress

In reviewing the Army's proposed restructuring of its aviation programs, including its proposed cancellation of the FARA program, Congress may consider a number of potential oversight questions, including but not necessarily limited to the following:

- What analysis did the Army conduct in support of its proposed restructuring of its aviation programs? Has the Army provided this analysis to Congress? If not, when does the Army plan to do so?
- Does the Army's proposed restructuring of its aviation programs, particularly the proposed cancellation of the FARA program, have a firm analytical foundation? Would canceling the FARA program be the most cost-effective path going forward?
- Given past significant shifts in Army plans for its aviation programs, including the cancellation of three pre-FARA efforts to develop replacements for its attack or scout helicopters, how much confidence could Congress have that the Army would not eventually cancel the approach to its aviation programs that it proposed on February 8, 2024?
- Can FARA's requirements for speed, range, endurance, and payload at the aircraft's planned size be achieved, and if so, how much time and funding would be needed to achieve them? Why did the Army not conduct a FARA AOA prior to spending \$2 billion on the FARA program?
- What would be the potential cost, schedule, and technical risks of the Army's proposed restructured aviation effort? Would the Army's communications network be sufficiently advanced and foolproof by 2030 to enable teaming between crewed and uncrewed aircraft, at scale, for the attack/reconnaissance mission?
- What implications would the Army's proposed restructuring, including the proposed cancellation of the FARA program, have for the U.S. rotorcraft industrial base, including both prime contractors and supplier firms? How quickly can the U.S. industrial base ramp up production of UASs in support of the Army's proposed restructured aviation effort?

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IF12592

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