CH-53K Helicopter Cost Trending Downward, Marine General Says

U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Michael S. Cederholm flies the CH-53K "King Stallion" at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, June 12, 2021. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Cpl. Yuritzy Gomez*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The unit cost of the Marine Corps' new heavy-lift helicopter is trending in the right direction as the helicopter prepares for its Initial Operational Test and Evaluation (IOT&E), a senior Marine Corps officer told Congress.

Rep. Vicki Hartzler, R-Missouri, during a June 30 hearing of the subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces for the House Armed Services Committee, asked Lt. Gen. Mark Wise, the Corps' deputy commandant for aviation, about the cost of a CH-53K King Stallion being $125 million, more than the cost of an F-35 strike fighter. She noted the proposed 2022 budget requested nine CH-53Ks, down from the 11 planned earlier for 2022. She also asked if the Marine Corps' requirement for 200 CH-53Ks would be reduced in light of the Corps' planned reduction of heavy helicopter squadrons from eight to five.

Wise replied that unit cost for the CH-53Ks in Low-Rate Production Lot 5 in fiscal 2021 was $97 million and for Lot 6 in fiscal 2022 was projected to be $94 million, lower than the cost of an F-35, "and trending in the right direction."

The general also said the Corps originally determined the requirement for CH-53Ks to be about 220 aircraft but reduced the official number to 200 because of affordability. He said the requirement will remain at 200 aircraft for the

foreseeable future.

“If there is a reduction, it will probably be less than we would normally think had we actually bought the program of record that was the requirement to begin with,” Wise said. “As we get to determining what that number is, any reduction would not happen until the end of program buys. That would reduce the likelihood that the cost would rise, depending on the last lot buys.”

The general noted the 200 number was based on an projected attrition rate that had not been updated.

“So, it could go below 200 – and it ma y– but I’m not sure it’s going to go grossly below” 200, he said.

Wise said progress has been made through risk-reduction initiatives in dealing with technical issues such as engine gas re-ingestion.

“As we get ready to start into IOT&E – we’re actually starting next month – we’re seeing some fairly impressive readiness rates for the test birds that are going to be doing that operational test,” he said.