

By John M. Doyle



The decision by U.S. House defense overseers to authorize continued funding for Next Generation Bomber studies has buoyed the hopes of Senate bomber advocates, even though Defense Secretary Robert Gates wants to wait before spending more.

“We’re going to do everything we can to keep that program alive and keep it going,” said Sen. John Thune (S.D.), senior Republican on the Senate

Armed Services airland subcommittee. Thune, whose state was a likely candidate for a long-range strike bomber base, has been a vocal critic of Gates’ plan to delay further research on the bomber. Gates has told lawmakers he wants to suspend related funding until after the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and Nuclear Posture Review are completed (Aerospace DAILY, May 15).

Gates has said the Defense Department has acquired more experience with unmanned aerial vehicles since the last QDR. He also wants to see if nuclear arms reduction talks with the Russians have any effect on the traditional U.S. triad of nuclear weapons delivery systems: missiles, submarines and bombers. President Barack Obama is slated to travel to Moscow next month to talk with Russian leaders.

Nevertheless, Thune said the project is “an important priority” and Congress should keep funding it. “It would be a big mistake, [with] all the resources that have gone into that and all the progress that’s been made, if it were shut down overnight,” he told Aviation Week June 23. The Senate Armed Services Committee is marking up its version of the annual defense policy bill this week.

The House Armed Services Committee (HASC) included \$215 million for additional, classified Air Force R&D in the fiscal 2010 defense authorization bill. That Air Force R&D is believed to contain the bomber project.

“The question in the House revolves more around the advanced technology associated with the bomber,” said Rep. Neil Abercrombie (D-Hawaii), chair of the House airland subcommittee.

Because of the classified nature of the information, Abercrombie said he couldn’t go into detail, but he noted there is general agreement in the House — particularly the HASC — about pursuing R&D associated with the new bomber. He said there was interest in “increased stealth capabilities” but would go no further than that.

Image: Defense Technology International