

Highlights of [GAO-11-332](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Defense, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The United States Marine Corps is facing a critical shortage of heavy-lift aircraft. In addition, current weapon systems are heavier than their predecessors, further challenging the Marine Corps's current CH-53E heavy-lift helicopters. To address the emerging heavy-lift requirements, the Marine Corps initiated the CH-53K Heavy Lift Replacement program, which has experienced significant cost increase and schedule delays since entering development in 2005.

This report (1) determines how the CH-53K's estimates of cost, schedule, and quantity have changed since the program began development and the impact of these changes and (2) determines how the CH-53K's current acquisition strategy will meet current program targets as well as the warfighter's needs. To address these objectives, GAO analyzed the program's budget, schedules, acquisition reports, and other documents and interviewed officials from the program office, the prime contractor's office, the Marine Corps, the Defense Contract Management Agency, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

View [GAO-11-332](#) or key components. For more information, contact Michael J. Sullivan at (202) 512-4841 or sullivanm@gao.gov.

DEFENSE ACQUISITIONS

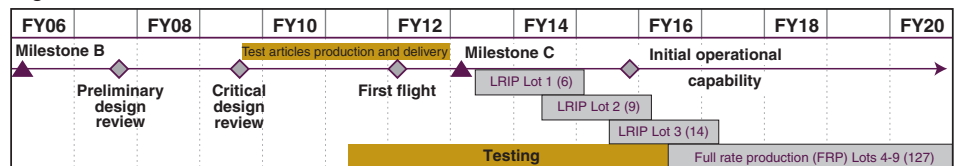
CH-53K Helicopter Program Has Addressed Early Difficulties and Adopted Strategies to Address Future Risks

What GAO Found

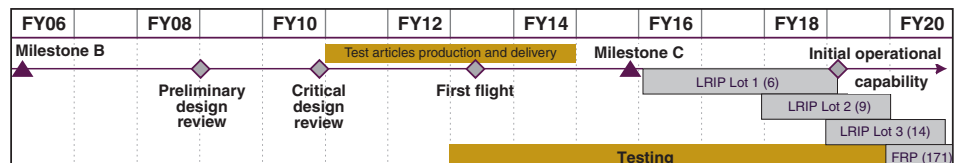
The CH-53K helicopter mission is to provide combat assault transport of heavy weapons, equipment, and supplies from sea to support Marine Corps operations ashore. Since the program began development in December 2005, its total cost estimate has grown by almost \$6.8 billion, from nearly \$18.8 billion to over \$25.5 billion as a result of a Marine Corps-directed quantity increase from 156 to 200 aircraft and schedule delays. The majority of the program's total cost growth is due to added quantities. Development cost growth and schedule delays resulted from beginning development before determining how to achieve requirements within program constraints, with miscommunication between the program office and prime contractor about systems engineering tasks and with late staffing by both the program office and the contractor. The program has also deferred three performance capabilities and relaxed two maintenance-based technical performance metrics in an effort to defer cost. Delivery of the CH-53K to the warfighter is currently scheduled for 2018—a delay of almost 3 years.

The CH-53K program has made progress addressing the difficulties it faced early in system development. It held a successful critical design review in July 2010 and has adopted mitigation strategies to address future program risk. The program's new strategy, as outlined in the President's fiscal year 2012 budget, lengthens the development schedule, increases development funding, and delays the production decision. However, adjustments made to the budget submitted to Congress reduce the program's fiscal year 2012 development funding by \$30.5 million (and by a total of \$94.6 million between fiscal years 2010 and 2015). According to information contained in the budget, this reduction would result in additional schedule delays to the program of approximately 7 months and a net increase of \$69 million to the total development cost estimate. The CH-53K program's new acquisition strategy addresses previous programmatic issues that led to early development cost growth and schedule delays.

Comparison of the CH-53K's Original and New Schedules
Original schedule



New schedule



LRIP Low-rate initial production FRP Full rate production

Source: GAO analysis of United States Marine Corps data.