

National Defense Authorization Act Testimony
Before the House Armed Services Committee
Congressman Mark Takano (CA-41)
May 8, 2013

Recently, a crew from the California Air National Guard that was operating a remotely piloted aircraft out of March Air Reserve Base was able to locate a survival life raft less than two minutes after being given a rough approximation of its position. Not two days, not two hours – two minutes! We are on the cusp of a new era – Remotely Piloted Aircraft or “RPAs” simply perform some tasks better than manned airplanes do. The majority of the United States’ RPA expertise, both combat and Defense Support of Civil Authorities, is located in the Air National Guard.

Unfortunately, that previously mentioned California Air National Guard unit will be out of business in less than four years unless they are included in the Air Force’s RPA Upgrade Plan. A plan they are not currently even mentioned in. Similar fates threaten ANG units flying the soon-to-be-phased out MQ-1 Predator in Arizona, North Dakota, Texas, and Ohio. The United States is on the verge of incorporating RPAs in the National Airspace System and these Air National Guard units have the most experience of any RPA operation. They are the true experts on how to do this right. In light of this, the Guard should be at the top of the list for conversion to safer, higher flying follow-on RPAs like the MQ-9 Reaper, rather than an afterthought.

America needs to capitalize on the Air National Guard’s expertise to truly reap the benefits of seamless RPA support for Search and Rescue efforts, Disaster Relief, and Emergency Services. Converting to the MQ-9 swiftly will also protect the thousands of jobs and countless small businesses that support these units.

The next five years will see substantial, maybe even exponential growth in Remotely Piloted Aircraft operations worldwide and America cannot afford to squander the significant advantage we have in this arena. As the MQ-1 nears the end of its service life, it is absolutely imperative that the Air Force revises its RPA Upgrade Plan and upgrades the forgotten Air National Guard MQ-1 units in California, Arizona, North Dakota, Texas, and Ohio to the MQ-9 as quickly as possible to prevent a gap in mission coverage. This will also ensure we capitalize on, rather than lose, the ANG’s critical expertise, and maintain America’s lead beyond the approaching RPA horizon.

While the Air Force does have a strategic basing process for the recapitalization of MQ-1s to MQ-9s, the criteria do not place proper emphasis on the importance of current MQ-1 Flying Training Units (FTUs) schoolhouses. The Air Force should prioritize the replacement of MQ-1s with MQ-9s at locations with existing FTU schoolhouses, which would allow the Air Force to capitalize on existing infrastructure, trained personnel, instructor expertise, and save taxpayer money.

We need to see a formal recapitalization plan for the replacement of all National Guard MQ-1 aircraft with MQ-9 aircraft. That plan should contain the criteria for beddown, including both the weight and scoring that will be given to MQ-1 wings and squadrons with co-located FTU schoolhouse missions.