

THE MACHINE

APPROVING THE FAILING FLYING ROBOTS

As I noted earlier this week, drones have proven to be very expensive failures in the last few weeks. Yesterday, Danger Room described yet another example, the Army's Gray Eagle (and since I obsess about these things, note the failed chip).

Beginning in March 2011, "poor reliability across all major subsystems" led to delays [in the Gray Eagle program] that would seemingly never end, according to a report from Edward Greer, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for developmental test and evaluation. During the same month, a Gray Eagle drone crashed in California after a faulty chip blocked a subsystem from sending commands to "a portion of the aircraft's flight control surfaces," Col. Timothy Baxter, the Army's project manager for unmanned aircraft systems, elaborated in an e-mail to *Inside Defense*.

"Flight testing was suspended," Greer's report added. The faulty chip was replaced and testing resumed, but the Army was now left with fewer available flight hours. The drone's mean times between failures – or the average time the drone or a component works without failure – is also short. First, the drone itself has an average failure every 25 hours, short of a required minimum of 100 hours. The drone's ground control station has a rate of 27 hours before a failure, short of a required 300. The Army has since lowered the requirement to 150 hours. The Gray Eagle's sensors fare a bit better: 134 hours to 250 hours required.

Then the Gray Eagle was delayed again last October. The report concludes that for the 2011 fiscal year, the Gray Eagle is meeting only four of seven “key performance parameters,” and the drone’s “system reliability continues to fall short of predicted growth,” which could be a problem for the upcoming tests scheduled for August.

In spite of these failures, the government is pushing to accelerate our embrace of drones.

Here’s why.

In the Center for Investigative Reporting’s coverage of the DHS report I examined earlier in the week (which includes a number of additional examples where drones failed to perform as promised), they quote co-Chair of the Drone caucus and Homeland Security Committee member, Henry Cuellar, simply assuming “they” had a strategic plan.

Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Texas, who has championed drones as the Democratic co-chairman of the Congressional Unmanned Systems Caucus, said that Customs and Border Protection has to go back to the basics and come up with a sound strategic plan for its drones.

“The first thing any agency should have is a strategic plan. I assumed they had a plan,” said Cuellar. “We have to know where we are going before we start buying any more of the assets.”

Among Cuellar’s top donors are Global Atomics, the maker of the Predators CBP can’t use effectively as well as the Gray Eagle that keeps failing, as well as Boeing and Honeywell, which also sell UAVs.

Meanwhile, Republic Report points to an even more troubling example of failed oversight: the almost \$500,000 a Northrop Grumman lobbyist was

advanced to spend some time in Congress overseeing—among other things—the historically wasteful F-35 program and Northrup Grumman’s Global Hawk drone (the one that crashed earlier this week).

In 2011, after Republicans seized the House of Representatives in a landslide victory, the House Armed Services Committee, which oversees the military, gained a new chairman, Representative Buck McKeon (R-CA). As with most leadership changes, McKeon and his committee hired new professional staff. Thomas MacKenzie, a vice president at Northrop Grumman, was tapped to work for the committee beginning in March of 2011.

[snip]

Northrop Grumman made sure he had extra cash before he went to work writing policy on the defense budget. Republic Report viewed a recently filed ethics disclosure form, and found that Northrop Grumman paid MacKenzie a \$498,334 bonus in 2011, just before he went to work under McKeon as a committee staffer. The bonus was almost the size of MacKenzie’s annual salary at the firm, which was \$529,379 in 2010. [View a copy of the disclosure [here](#).]

[snip]

Representative McKeon, by far the **biggest recipient** of Northrop Grumman campaign contributions in Congress, has **defended** billions of dollars in questionable projects for MacKenzie’s former employer. McKeon has fought to cancel the retirement of the Northrop’s RQ-4 Global Hawk, a drone the Pentagon could save **\$2.5 billion** by cutting. He’s pressed to secure funding for a range of different aircraft developed by Northrop Grumman, from a new nuclear-capable

long-range bomber to the F-35, which is slated to be the most expensive weapon developed in human history.

There's a reason Congress keeps pushing drones, and it is only partly because of their utility in certain circumstances. And it's because Congress is being larded with people paid to push drones, but not exercise any real oversight over them.

Update: I had misstated CIR's name. I've corrected that above.