ELON MUSK GETS ANOTHER NO BID PAYOLA CONTRACT

Space Force may use SpaceX satellites instead of developing its own, senator says

The satellites in question are

part of the data transport layer of the Space Development Agency's Proliferated Warfighter Space Architecture.

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The Air Force may cancel the development of hundreds of Space Development Agency satellites and give the work to SpaceX, one senator said Thursday—a move that would shut out other companies hoping to bid.

The satellites in question are part of the data transport layer of the Proliferated Warfighter Space Architecture, a planned network of hundreds of satellites in low Earth orbit.

"I'm told that the Air Force is considering canceling solicitations for this transport layer on SDA's Tranche 2 and 3, and instead using Starshield," Sen. Kevin Cramer said during a Senate Armed Services

committee hearing Thursday to consider the nominations of several Defense Department nominees, including Troy Meink for Air Force secretary.

Should the Air Force go through with that plan, it could accelerate the delivery of some capabilities into orbit with SpaceX's existing Starshield constellations—and cement SpaceX's growing dominance in space.

Cutting these bids "means maybe eight, or more, small-, mid-sized companies would not be allowed to bid," Cramer said.

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Meink said he wasn’t aware of the potential move, but emphasized he’s committed to more competition within the defense sector, if confirmed.

“One of the things that I push for, particularly over the last 10 years, is to expand competition and expand the industry base. That ends up almost always with the best result, both from a capability and cost to the government. I'm not familiar with those discussions going on within the Pentagon. If confirmed, I look forward to diving into that and assessing where they're going and what they're recommending, but I've not seen those recommendations at this point,” Meink said.

In a statement, the Air Force said officials have not made any decisions on the transport layer of Tranche 2 and 3, and the

service is evaluating “all acquisition programs in the context of FY26 president’s budget deliberations and the administration’s priorities.”

The Air Force and Space Force “are committed to the efficient use of taxpayer dollars and maximizing the delivery of capability to the joint warfighter. We look forward to sharing the status of our acquisition programs with our stakeholders in Congress and elsewhere when the FY26 budget is delivered in the coming months,” a service spokesperson said.

The potential for canceled contracts comes as the Space Force looks for ways to cut 8 percent from its budget and redirect those funds to new priorities outlined by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

Chief of Space Operations Gen. Chance Saltzman said he provided “lower priority” missions as possible cuts, but declined to give specifics on what was offered.

“I'm hopeful that the Space Force won't take any cuts, and so I certainly don't want to talk about potential cuts that may not happen, because we want to keep everything we've got...this is purely a planning drill, we're not actually ready to make those decisions yet. So I certainly don't want to talk about something before the secretary makes that decision,” Saltzman said during a Mitchell Institute event Wednesday.

The Space Force will likely fare well in the administration’s budget shakeup since the service was created during President Donald Trump’s first

term, and will be a key part of Trump's Golden Dome effort.

In line with the administration's pro-space agenda, Meink, who has been serving as the principal deputy director of the National Reconnaissance Office since 2020, was tapped to lead the Department of the Air Force.

Unlike Trump's other service secretary picks, Meink has decades of experience in the national security and intelligence world. After starting his career as a KC-135 navigator, he went on to lead multiple space programs and served as the deputy under secretary of the Air Force for space during the Obama administration.

Meink sailed through a smooth confirmation hearing, with no apparent objections from any senators.

However, two Democratic SASC members have previously prodded Meink on his ties to SpaceX CEO Elon Musk after Reuters reported in February that Meink arranged a multibillion-dollar contract in a way that favored SpaceX, leading the NRO inspector general to investigate whether Meink had improperly skewed the contract toward SpaceX.

“These reports raise concerns about your ability, if confirmed as Secretary, to treat contractors fairly and prioritize the Air Force’s mission over Elon Musk’s business interests,” Senators Elizabeth Warren and Tammy Duckworth wrote in a Feb. 27 letter.