

MONDAY MORNING GROUP OF WESTERN RIVERSIDE COUNTY
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PREVENTING THE F-15 STRIKE FIGHTER GAP IN HOMELAND DEFENSE CAPABILITY

ISSUE: The current F-15C aircraft are reaching the end of their life cycle and are scheduled to be replaced by F-15EX by 2031. However, a delayed time period would mean California Air National Guard units would be without any aircraft for two years, resulting in an unnecessary, expensive, and dangerous situation.

ACTION: The Monday Morning Group requests Administration, Congressional, and Department of Defense support to maintain current F-15C aircraft through F-15EX transition period and distribute replacement F-15EX aircraft concurrently amongst affected National Guard fighter wings. This also requires that corresponding F-15C maintenance appropriations be sustained at a rate appropriate to maintain them throughout the transition period.

BACKGROUND: California is home to the Air National Guard's 144th Fighter Wing, based in Fresno and Riverside, CA. The Wing's mission is to protect the West Coast of the United States by defending the homeland, deterring strategic aggression, and facing the pacing challenge from China, Russia, and North Korea. These missions are established as the highest priorities in the National Defense Strategy (NDS).

There are five National Guard Aerospace Control Alert (ACA) missions protecting the corners of the United States in: California, Florida, Louisiana, Oregon, and Massachusetts. The 144th also has a unique 30-year partnership with Ukraine, training their fighter pilots under the U.S. State Partnership Program collaboratively sponsored by the Departments of State and Defense.

The current F-15EX fielding plan designates three fighter wings to receive new aircraft in sequence versus in parallel/concurrently, meaning National Guard fighter wings will realize a two-year capability gap, in which the wing would be without any aircraft. The Air Force has designated all F-15Cs for decommissioning by FY26 and cut sustainment funding for F-15C in FY26 from its budget. Yet, California is programmed to receive its first F-15EX in FY 2028 and fully transition by FY 2031, creating up to a two-year gap in which the Wing will have no aircraft.

If a transition gap in aircraft occurs, pilots will lose currency and become unqualified to fly F-15EX when they are eventually fielded. Once a pilot loses currency, they must be retrained by completing the entire fighter aircraft transition program. When an Air Force pilot loses the qualification to fly, their military career and livelihood are at risk. A transition gap of 2 years would result in fighter pilots leaving the Air Force for civilian airline jobs.

Because of the difficulty of recruiting and training fighter pilots and maintainers, the 144th Fighter Wing will struggle for years to get back to full strength and reach minimum readiness standards. This could even create an impetus for the Air Force to deactivate California's 144th Fighter Wing and reassign it to another state.