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U.S. Army Small Uncrewed Aircraft Systems Programs

The U.S. Army has requested FY2026 funding for small uncrewed aircraft systems (sUAS, commonly referred to as drones). These systems support intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); target acquisition and strike; electronic warfare operations; and other missions. Congress has expressed an interest in the U.S. military's UAS capabilities and in the Department of Defense's (DOD's) ability to develop, acquire, and integrate such systems into tactical units. In proposed FY2026 defense authorization and appropriations legislation, Congress is considering whether to approve, modify, or deny the Army's requested funding and its plans for incorporating these systems into Army units. This product primarily covers Group 1 and 2 UAS—that is, those sUAS that weigh less than 55 pounds and fly at or below 3,500 feet above ground level.

Background

In 1988, at the direction of Congress (see P.L. 100-202, 101 Stat. 1329-60), DOD published its first "Master Plan" for uncrewed aircraft, establishing requirements and an acquisition strategy for UAS. The plan recommended a "close range" UAS for "lower level tactical units," one that could be acquired in large numbers and at low cost. Beginning in the 2000s, the AeroVironment RQ-11 Raven, a 4-pound fixed-wing aircraft, largely filled this role for the Army. By 2010, the Army reportedly fielded close to 4,000 Raven aircraft. The Marine Corps, Special Operations Command, and the Air Force also adopted the Raven.

In February 2024, then-Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth and Army Chief of Staff General Randy George announced plans to phase the RQ-11 Raven out of service as part of a broader "rebalance" of the Army's aviation investments and to "increase investments in research and development to expand and accelerate the Army's unmanned aerial reconnaissance capability." Under the ongoing Transformation in Contact (TiC) initiative, first revealed by General George in December 2023, the Army is evaluating various types of sUAS and the potential force structure requirements that may accompany the integration of these systems into ground units.

The second Trump Administration has sought to encourage the Army's adoption of drones and reduce perceived barriers to the development and procurement of sUAS within DOD. In an April 30, 2025, memorandum, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth directed the Army to implement a comprehensive transformation strategy, including by fielding unmanned systems and ground/air launched effects "in every Division by the end of 2026." In a July 16, 2025, press release, DOD stated that Secretary Hegseth had issued a second, department-wide memorandum, "rescinding restrictive policies that hindered drone production."

Figure 1. Army Short-Range Reconnaissance (SRR) Quadcopter

Source: Daniel Amburg, Fort Dix, Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS).

Army sUAS Programs

The Army has proposed fielding what it refers to as the Family of Small Uncrewed Aircraft Systems (FoSUAS) to replace the Raven and to provide ground forces with "situational awareness and enhanced force protection," according to the service's FY2026 budget request to Congress. This approach is designed to align specific systems to particular echelons—squad, platoon, company, and battalion—and deliver capabilities tailored to each level of organization. In selecting the aircraft for the FoSUAS, the Army has stated that it adopted a "flexible and agile acquisition plan" to respond to evolving technology and avoid committing to a single product.

- **Soldier-Borne Sensor (SBS).** The SBS program is meant to provide Army squads with a small UAS for conducting reconnaissance. The Army's requirements for an SBS are for an aircraft that weighs less than 0.33 pounds and can fly for at least 15 minutes. The Army's current selection for the SBS program is the Teledyne FLIR Black Hornet. The Army fielded the first SBS systems in FY2019.

- **Purpose Built Attritable System (PBAS).** The PBAS program is meant to provide a first-person view (FPV) drone capability for Army platoons. According to the Army, the PBAS system consists of "two [10 inch] air vehicles and four [5 inch] air vehicles with modular payload(s) to include ability to integrate and employ a variety of lethal/non-lethal armaments and munitions."

- **Short-Range Reconnaissance (SRR).** The SRR program is the Army's first program of record for a small quadcopter drone for Army platoons (see **Figure**

1). The Army's requirements are for a drone that weighs less than five pounds and is able to fly for 30 minutes. The Army's current selections for the SRR system are the Skydio X10D and the Teal Drones' Black Widow.

- **Medium-Range Reconnaissance (MRR).** The MRR system is meant to provide Army companies with an sUAS that has a range of at least 10 kilometers (6 miles) and an endurance of 30 minutes. In its FY2026 budget proposal, the Army requested funds to procure 107 "Company-Level sUAS" systems, which the Army has said are intended to provide an initial capability for a future MRR system. In 2024, the Army selected two companies—Anduril Industries and Performance Drone Works—to each supply aircraft for the Company-Level sUAS as part of DOD's Replicator initiative.

- **Long-Range Reconnaissance (LRR).** The LRR sUAS is meant to provide Army battalions with an sUAS. The Army is seeking an aircraft with a "weight of less than 55 [pounds], a range of 40-60 [kilometers] and endurance of 5-10 hours." The Army plans to field prototypes of an LRR system to TiC units in FY2025, according to one official's congressional testimony.

- **Joint Tactical Autonomous Aerial Resupply System (JTAARS).** The JTAARS is meant to provide a cargo delivery system for "highly mobile tactical combat forces," according to the Army. The Army is seeking a Group 3 UAS—that is, an aircraft that weighs between 55 and 1,350 pounds—capable of lifting 125 pounds over a distance of 13 kilometers one way (8 miles).

FY2026 Budget Request

In its FY2026 budget request to Congress, the Army requested approximately $803.9 million in discretionary funding for the procurement and research, development, test, and evaluation (RDT&E) of the sUAS programs described in this product (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Requested and Enacted Funding for Army Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems

(in millions of dollars of discretionary budget authority)

	FY2024 Enacted	FY2025 Enacted	FY2026 Request
Procurement	$72.5	$70.5	$747.9
RDT&E	$27.4	$27.9	$56.0

Source: CRS analysis of the DOD FY2026 budget request to Congress and Army budget justification documents.

Notes: Table reflects the funding for the programs described in this product. Figures do not reflect potential funding for such programs provided by the FY2025 reconciliation legislation (P.L. 119-21).

Legislative Activity

In Section 20005 of the FY2025 reconciliation legislation (P.L. 119-21), commonly known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, Congress appropriated $1.4 billion "for the expansion of the small unmanned aerial system industrial base." All funds were "appropriated to the Secretary of Defense for fiscal year 2025" and carry a five-year period of availability, meaning that they could be obligated until September 30, 2029, and expended through FY2034. In a July 22, 2025, letter to Secretary Hegseth, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mike D. Rogers and Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Roger F. Wicker requested DOD provide a plan for how the department intends to spend the funds it provided in the reconciliation legislation.

Considerations for Congress

As part of its oversight role, Congress could examine the following:

Personnel

Several foreign militaries, including that of Ukraine and Poland, have established specialized units for operating and training with sUAS. Congress has considered legislation that would require the Army to create a "Drone Corps" as a separate basic branch of the Army, a proposition the Army opposed. Congress has also enacted legislation directing the Secretary of Defense to provide a report on "equipping platoon-sized ground combat formations with group 1 or group 2" UAS (P.L. 118-31, §1071). Congress may request briefings on whether the Army's TiC exercises have generated requirements for unit organization and training, and on the potential implications for force structure stemming from the planned widescale adoption of sUAS.

Industrial Base and Supply Chain

A 2025 Defense Innovation Board (DIB) report found that uncrewed systems "stand out due to their unique reliance on adversarial nations throughout the manufacturing lifecycle." Congress has directed the Secretary of Defense to provide a report on the supply chain for sUAS, including an assessment of DOD's "total requirement for sUASs" (P.L. 118-159, §162). In the report accompanying the Senate Appropriations Committee's version of the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2026, the Committee expressed concern about "vulnerabilities in the domestic sUAS manufacturing base" (S. 2572; S.Rept. 119-52). Congress has enacted legislation providing DOD funding to expand the sUAS industrial base (P.L. 119-21) and Members have requested briefings on how DOD intends to allocate such funds. Congress may consider whether or not such proposals meet congressional intent.

Cost and Technical Risk

Some analysts have noted the effectiveness of Ukraine's use of drones and identified steps the U.S. Army should take to build its sUAS capabilities. Others have questioned the effectiveness of FPV drones in Ukraine. According to one analysis, "systems which cannot be upgraded post-delivery to new radio and EW-related modules will quickly become obsolete." Army officials have said in congressional testimony and elsewhere that the service is applying a modular open systems approach (MOSA) to its sUAS programs, one that could enable it to "upgrade platforms without being locked into a specific configuration or solution." Congress may seek information about the Army's approach, and about the projected lifecycle and sustainment costs for the Army's sUAS.

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