

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105341](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The F-35 aircraft, with its advanced capabilities, represents a growing portion of DOD's tactical aviation fleet—with about 450 of the aircraft fielded. DOD plans to procure nearly 2,500 F-35s at an estimated life cycle cost of the program exceeding \$1.7 trillion. Of this amount, \$1.3 trillion are associated with operating and sustaining the aircraft.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 included a provision for GAO to review F-35 sustainment efforts. This report, among other things, assesses the extent to which (1) challenges exist with F-35 depot and organizational-level maintenance, and (2) DOD has determined its desired mix of government and contractor sustainment support for the future.

GAO reviewed F-35 program documentation, reviewed readiness and performance data, visited two F-35 depots and three operational installations, conducted a survey of all 15 F-35 installations, and interviewed officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations to DOD, including reassessing F-35 sustainment elements to determine government and contractor responsibility and any required technical data, and making final decisions on changes to F-35 sustainment to address performance and affordability. DOD concurred with all of GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105341](#). For more information, contact Diana Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov.

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F-35 AIRCRAFT

DOD and the Military Services Need to Reassess the Future Sustainment Strategy

What GAO Found

Maintenance challenges negatively affect F-35 aircraft readiness. The F-35 fleet mission capable rate—the percentage of time the aircraft can perform one of its tasked missions—was about 55 percent in March 2023, far below program goals. This performance was due in part to challenges with depot and organizational maintenance (see fig.). The program was behind schedule in establishing depot maintenance activities to conduct repairs. As a result, component repair times remained slow with over 10,000 waiting to be repaired—above desired levels. At the same time, organizational-level maintenance has been affected by a number of issues, including a lack of technical data and training.

F-35 Maintenance Challenges Negatively Affecting Aircraft Readiness



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information; U.S. Air Force/R. Nial Bradshaw. | GAO-23-105341

The Department of Defense (DOD) relies heavily on its contractor to lead and manage F-35 sustainment (see fig.). However, as DOD seeks expanded government control, it has neither (1) determined the desired mix of government and contractor roles, nor (2) identified and obtained the technical data needed to support its desired mix. The military services must take over management of F-35 sustainment by October 2027 and have an opportunity to make adjustments—specifically to the contractor-managed elements. Reassessing its approach could help DOD address its maintenance challenges and reduce costs.

Responsibility for the 12 F-35 Sustainment Elements

Prime contractor responsibility	Government responsibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information technology (IT) systems continuous support Maintenance planning and management Supply support Support equipment Sustaining engineering Technical data Training and training support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design interface Facilities and infrastructure Packaging, handling, storage, and transportation (PHS&T) Personnel Product support management

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-23-105341