

Legal mess clouds Navy jet project

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GD fires Norden Systems; Norden sues. TI loses subcontract; TI sues Norden. The Navy worries that courtroom documents could shoot holes in its veil of secrecy.

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There is trouble in one of the highly classified military aircraft programs at General Dynamics Corp.

Trouble is, it's not clear what the trouble is.

In April, GD fired Norden Systems Inc. as developer of a radar system for the new A-12 attack plane, a Navy project worth billions.

GD says Norden hopelessly fouled up development of the A-12 radar.

Norden says GD kept changing the radar requirements and wouldn't pay its bills.

Texas Instruments Inc. says Norden wouldn't pay *its* bills and caused TI to lose an important subcontract.

Now Norden is suing GD. TI is suing Norden.

And the Navy says it wishes everybody would just shut up.

A state judge in Stamford, Conn., will take the first step in sorting it all out Tuesday in a hearing on GD's motion to dismiss the Norden lawsuit.

The outcome is important for all involved.

So far, TI has lost at least \$40 million and an important line of business. Norden has had to lay off 400 workers, and its future may be in doubt.

GD has scrapped as much as 18 months of work on the A-12 radar at a time when Congress is looking for any excuse to cancel or cut back major programs.

And the Navy is worried that the litigation could trigger leaks of sensitive military secrets.

Because the A-12 is still heavily classified, none of the companies will talk about the litigation. The Navy only recently acknowledged that the A-12 program even exists and refuses comment on the suit.

Nonetheless, court records and testimony in an unrelated proceeding shed some light on the secretive program and indicate a bruising and critical battle may be shaping up.

"It's very unusual that it gets to the point where a subcontractor is dismissed and then they get into a scrap over it," said Ron Fraser, an analyst with the Center for Defense Information in Washington.

The A-12, a medium-range, carrier-based attack plane, is the Navy's highest-priority aviation program. It is scheduled to go into service in

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