From London on 11 July the Ministry of Defence (MOD) confirmed the deal to purchase nine P-8A Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) for the Royal Air Force (RAF).

These new aircraft, which will be based at RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland, will play a vital role in protecting the UK’s nuclear deterrent and the UK’s two new aircraft carriers. They will also be able to locate and track hostile submarines, and will enhance the UK’s maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) capability. This capability will also bring economic benefits to Scotland and the wider UK, with an additional 400 personnel based at RAF Lossiemouth.

Defence Secretary Michael Fallon commented: ‘Our new MPA aircraft will provide significant protection of the UK’s nuclear deterrent and our £6 billion aircraft carriers. They are part of our plan for stronger and better defence, backed by a budget that will rise each year of this decade. That means more ships, more aircraft, more troops available at readiness, better equipment for special forces, more being spent on cyber – to deal with the increased threats to our country.’

The P-8A MPA, manufactured by Boeing, are being purchased from the US Government via a Foreign Military Sale. The cost of developing and delivering the UK’s MPA capability, including manpower, training, infrastructure and necessary support at RAF Lossiemouth will be around £3 billion over the next decade. By tapping into the well-established US production line, the UK will get a tested and proven piece of equipment. In addition, the RAF will benefit from collaboration with some of the UK’s key allies, including the US Navy and the Royal Australian Air Force.

The P-8A can operate at long range from its operating base without refuelling and has the endurance to carry out high and low-level airborne maritime and overland surveillance for extended periods. This advanced aircraft will also be able to conduct wide-area search of open ocean to locate stricken craft and to drop rescue liferafts and equipment to vessels and people in distress.

Tony Douglas, Chief Executive Officer of the MOD’s Defence Equipment and Support organisation, added: ‘Already in service with other nations, the P-8A aircraft was the best solution to fill our Maritime Patrol Aircraft capability gap; it is tried, tested and can be delivered in the timeline we need. The fact that we have been able to commit the main investment decision on this key procurement
less than nine months after the Government announced its intention to buy these aircraft is a great testament to the agility, professionalism, and drive of Defence Equipment & Support (DE&S), working closely with colleagues across MOD and the US Navy.’

The P-8A is based on the Boeing 737, which is already supplied by UK industry, supporting several hundred direct UK jobs. Furthermore, more, UK manufacturers also already provide specialist sub-systems for the P-8 itself. Companies include Marshall for the auxiliary fuel tanks, Martin Baker for the crew seats and General Electric for weapon pylons. The new order of P-8As is also set to create opportunities for the UK to bid for training and support contracts, it is understood.

The announcement of this deal also marks the point at which responsibility for leadership of the MPA Programme transfers from Joint Forces Command to the RAF.

With the first aircraft due to arrive in the UK in 2019/2020, the RAF has been committed to maintaining the skills needed to operate these MPAs through the seed-corn programme, which has embedded former RAF MPA operators within the MPA squadrons of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA.

Air Vice-Marshal Gerry Mayhew, who is responsible for the RAF’s fast jets and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance assets, reflected: ‘The seed-corn initiative has been vital in ensuring that our future MPA aircrew are prepared to regenerate the UK’s MPA capability. By retaining those essential skills, our aircrew are already on the front foot when it comes to operating these new aircraft.’

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