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## Anxious Teams in Limbo on Antarctic Contract

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Contractor teams vying for the latest round of a long-term National Science Foundation contract—worth at least \$2 billion to manage site logistics and science support for its huge polar research program in Antarctica—would like to hear from the agency soon about who the winner will be. But many of the contenders would just like to hear from the agency, period.



Photo: National Science Foundation

South Pole research facilities have grown since the 1960s, when site construction and logistics contractors were first hired. This photo shows the McMurdo station in Antarctica, but the research facility is on the polar plateau, where there is no exposed ground or ocean.



Photo: Bruce Buckley / ENR

KBR uses Washington, D.C., subway billboards to tout its credentials to be the government's Antarctica support contractor.

Sources say NSF has provided bidders with virtually no procurement status update or direction

since February, when proposals for the contract were turned in to the agency. NSF wants to have the contract in place by early next year. The contract is to support a research program estimated at \$300 million per year over a potential 12.5-year life. Since 1999 the contract has been held by a team led by Raytheon Co., El Segundo, Calif.

Teams are concerned about procurement schedule slippage and the agency's "radio silence," says one team executive, who declined to be identified. Company sources say proposal review is up to three months behind, possibly ruling out a chance for teams to present and polish proposals before a final selection is made, likely in September.

Team managers, who had hoped for a decision last month, also are concerned that a protest from a losing bidder could delay contract transition by up to 90 days. That occurred during the contract's last procurement in 1999. "They're not talking to anyone," says one team executive. Adds another, "NSF is a most bizarre client."

Gunther Imer, NSF contracting officer for the project and a former Defense Dept. weapons system procurement official, declined comment until after the award is made.

The procurement has attracted interest from seven bidding teams, made up of federal IT and defense-systems contractors and large engineering-construction firms, some veterans of Antarctic work or procurement over the last several decades. Seeking to raise their profiles to NSF evaluators, several teams are touting their capabilities on large billboards placed strategically at the subway station adjacent to the agency's Arlington, Va., headquarters and on train cars.

Raytheon's logo is not among them, as sources say NSF tends to shy away from choosing incumbent-led teams. But the firm is believed to be a major subcontractor on a team led by AECOM Technology Services, Los Angeles. AECOM unit Holmes & Narver Inc. was NSF's Antarctic contractor in the 1970s and competed for the 1999 award.

Also vying is Houston-based KBR Inc. William P. Utt, its chairman, president and CEO, touts the firm's government logistics experience for the U.S. Army in war zones, from Bosnia to Afghanistan, under the Logistics Civil Augmentation Program (LOGCAP) contracts. The firm is the primary LOGCAP contractor in Iraq but was recently passed over for major task orders in Afghanistan under a new contract version awarded in 2007.

Utt is still optimistic. "We would love to do Antarctica because it's a very useful extension of our LOGCAP type of work," he says. "We put together a very good team and an aggressive bid."

CH2M Hill Cos., Denver, and Fluor Corp., Irving, Texas, the LOGCAP task order winners in Afghanistan who also manage large contracts for the U.S. Energy Dept., also are proposing for Antarctica. Neither would publicly discuss their proposals or team members, but engineer-contractor Day & Zimmermann, Philadelphia, is believed to be on the latter's team.

Others in the hunt are led by large defense-systems contractors such as Lockheed Martin Corp., Bethesda, Md. The firm “is attracted by NSF’s desire to extract the most science possible from the facilities in Antarctica,” says Celia Lang, program director for the firm’s bid. She notes Lockheed’s past support to NASA on various space missions but declines to reveal team members. A joint venture of Computer Sciences Corp. and EG&G Inc., a unit of URS Corp., San Francisco, also is proposing. Another is ITT, which has Parsons Corp., Pasadena, Calif., as a key subcontractor. To bolster science support, universities are also among the team members, sources say.

According to published reports, NSF received \$3 billion in stimulus funding under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to bolster its research efforts, particularly in climate change. Proposing teams still worry whether the agency’s program budget will stay intact over the contract’s proposed duration.

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As ENR Editor-at-Large for Management, Business and Workforce, Debra K. Rubin has a broad vantage for news, issues and trends in global engineering, architecture and construction—from corporate finance and executive management to regulation and risk, next-generation workforce and developing markets such as offshore wind energy.

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