

SPA 9102 RFT circling



SOVEREIGN SATCOM

Defence has sent advanced warning to industry that a request for tender (RFT) is near for a key element of the Space 9102 satellite communications (SATCOM) project.

Appearing on the AusTender website on 15 July, the notice provided an update about the current status of the SPA 9102 Line of Effort 2 (LOE2) Narrowband Satellite Communications project. Defence advised potential suppliers and other interested parties to register interest in "...participating in any future RFT process relating to the project".

Understandably, potential tenderers are required to execute a non-disclosure agreement in order to receive the tender documentation set. The notice also stated that whilst First Pass Approval has been achieved, no other Australian Government approvals have yet been obtained. It is Defence's intention to seek Second Pass Approval for SPA 9102 LOE2 from the Australian Government at a later stage.

Perhaps worryingly for an Australian Defence Force (ADF) requirement

with such a chequered history, the notice made clear that "...unless and until all necessary Government approvals are obtained, the project may or may not proceed and is subject to change".

Against the caveat that any information provided may be subject to change, the notice stated that Defence will be seeking a prime contractor to deliver the SPA 9102 LOE2 capability to be outlined in the function and performance specification and statement of work contained in the RFT.

SPA 9102 is essentially a repackaging and condensed version of the previously long-running then abruptly cancelled Joint Project 9102 that was to have introduced a sovereign SATCOM capability for the ADF to reduce reliance on that capability being provided by foreign-owned satellites and for which Lockheed Martin had been identified as preferred tenderer in April 2023.

According to the AusTender notice, SPA 9102 LOE2 will be broken down into two distinct segments, as follows:

Space Segment: an ADF-owned geostationary spacecraft incorporating a UHF SATCOM payload, with a

DEFENCE INTENDS TO ENGAGE A SINGLE PRIME CONTRACTOR FOR BOTH THE ACQUISITION AND SUPPORT CONTRACTS

LEFT: Release of an RFT for a sovereign narrowband SATCOM capability for the ADF is imminent. Image: DTR

nominal design life of 10 years, that interoperates with existing Defence in-service UHF radios and provides cross-banding to contractor-provided wideband communications infrastructure to enable Defence narrowband communications and strategic reach-back services; and

Support Services: contractor-delivered services required to operate and sustain the capability, including spacecraft operations; telemetry, tracking and commanding through contractor-provided ground infrastructure interfaced with Defence networks for strategic reach-back services; the provision of payload control, payload monitoring and spectrum monitoring capability to ADF SATCOM operations; and ongoing sustainment under an availability-based service framework.

Defence intends to engage a single prime contractor for both the acquisition and support contracts, with the successful tenderer consequently responsible for the delivery and sustainment of the sought after narrowband SATCOM capability over its prescribed life-of-type. Tender responses for only part of the scope of works will not be accepted.

Release of the SPA 9102 RFT is anticipated from late August 2026 onwards.

- Ian Bostock