

March 26, 2013 9:11 am

# Bristow wins search and rescue contract

By Rose Jacobs and Hannah Kuchler



Dorset's loss is Somerset's gain. When the government chose a winner on Tuesday in the contest to run the country's search and rescue (SAR) helicopter services, it signed the death warrant for the Portland SAR base – one of two such bases to close following privatisation.

But while there was dismay on the Dorset coast, 30 miles away the mood was brighter. The winning bid is

set to secure hundreds of jobs in Yeovil, Somerset, the UK home of AgustaWestland, the helicopter manufacturer.

Bristow Group, the Texas-based helicopter operator which clinched the 11-year, £1.6bn contract, has pledged to buy 11 AgustaWestland aircraft to help replace an ageing fleet of Sea Kings operated by the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy.

That promise has, in turn, prompted Finmeccanica, AgustaWestland's Italian parent, to promise to build the search and rescue variant of the helicopter in a town that gave the UK manufacturer its name – "Westland" – because the site lay to the west of Yeovil town centre.

Graham Cole, chairman of AgustaWestland, estimates the deal will secure 1,500 UK jobs up and down the supply chain.

He believes there is worldwide demand for 20 times as many of the AW189 SAR helicopters as called for in the UK contract. "There are a number of countries watching the UK, and which have shown interest in these helicopters," he said. "That interest will now be greater."

Bristow undercut by about half the maximum £3.1bn the government had said it was willing to spend on SAR services.

The Department for Transport said the greater reach of the new helicopters would allow the closure of two bases without any reduction in response times.

But Barry Sheerman, Labour MP for Huddersfield, asked the House of Commons why the

service was being sold to a Texan company “rather than to the British Navy and Air Force”. He added: “It seems a rather strange decision.”

The other competing operators were Scotland-based Bond Helicopter and CHC of Canada. The other manufacturers were EADS's Eurocopter, which came out empty-handed, and Sikorsky of the US, which will supply Bristow with 11 S-92s.

The contract will run from April 2015 to 2026. A transition agreement with the Ministry of Defence, which runs the service now, will ensure continuity of service for the military personnel who transfer to the new operator.

*Additional reporting by Jim Pickard*

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