

U.S. aircraft carriers get new defense: lobbyists

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Aircraft carriers, perhaps the ultimate symbol of U.S. military might, are getting a new defensive system: the lobbying power of folks who build them.

Key component suppliers announced the launch Wednesday of the Aircraft Carrier Industrial Base Coalition. Its goal: to get Congress to rethink a Bush administration plan to shrink the fleet from 12 to 11.

"We want to make sure that they know they're tinkering with a vital part of our sea capabilities and defense," said Gerald Nicholson, group co-chairman and chief executive of High Ridge, Missouri-based Marlo Coil, which sells the Navy heating, air-conditioning, ventilation and refrigeration products.

In his spending plan for the fiscal year starting October 1, President Bush proposed to mothball the carrier John F. Kennedy as part of a restructuring of Navy spending that would also delay for one year the construction of CVN 21, its next-generation nuclear carrier, until 2008.

Nicholson said more than 2,000 suppliers from 46 states contributed to construction of a single aircraft carrier, employing over 100,000 workers.

Group members said they would hold their first annual "action days" in Washington next week to prod lawmakers on funding future carrier operations.

Northrop Grumman Corp., the world's largest warship builder, would like the administration to speed up its shipbuilding timetable, its chief executive, Ronald Sugar, said in a mid-February interview.