

WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

WASHINGTON - If the National Guard is going to be sent into the game, it needs to be in the huddle.

That's the argument made by a group of lawmakers, including Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb.

They say the leader of the National Guard deserves a promotion and a seat on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They also want to award the Guard more budgetary power to obtain equipment.

"The Guard has become elevated, therefore its leadership needs to be elevated," Nelson said Tuesday at a press conference.

The Commission on the National Guard and Reserve will hold a hearing today on the lawmakers' proposal.

Nelson said the role of the Guard has changed from a supplemental reserve force to an operational one. He said the National Guard makes up nearly half the forces in .

"Somebody has got to tell me why they wouldn't have an equal seat at the table," Nelson said.

The Guard's equipment stocks have been depleted by duties in and other new missions, and will cost billions of dollars to replenish.

The Nebraska National Guard is short 7,500 pieces of equipment with a replacement value of \$80 million. The broken, destroyed or missing equipment includes armored Humvees, night vision goggles and body armor.

Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke, the Nebraska National Guard commander and president of the Adjutants General Association of the , has advocated elevating the Guard's stature within the Pentagon.

Not everyone thinks it's a good idea. Two top generals described their opposition last year.

Gen. James L. Jones, commander of NATO, and Gen. Lance Smith, commander of Joint Forces, said such a move would complicate the military chain of command and cause division among active-duty and Guard forces.

Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., got a taste of that resistance recently when he discussed the issue with a group of Air Force personnel in Nebraska .

They responded as if he had insulted their mothers, Terry said.

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