

Admiral: Navy Planning to Extend Service Lives of 5 Ohio-Class Subs



The U.S. Navy Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine USS Rhode Island (SSBN 740) arrived in Gibraltar for a scheduled port visit, Nov. 1, 2022. *U.S. NAVY*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Navy is planning to extend the service lives of up to five Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) to help cover a projected shortfall in the 2030s as aging subs retire faster than newly built Columbia-class submarines can replace them, a service official told attendees of the Naval Submarine League's annual symposium here on Nov. 1.

Rear Adm. Scott W. Pappano, strategic submarines program

executive officer, said that the Navy will see its fleet of SSBNs dwindle from 14 today to 10 or 11 sometime in the 2030s. Because the Navy requirement is for 10 operational submarines at all times, that situation leaves the Navy with very little margin, he said.

As a result, the service is examining the possibilities of extending the service lives of some subs by about three years.

“Can we look at specific hulls individually and get additional life out of those hulls with some targeted maintenance? We are looking at that right now,” Pappano said. “We are planning right now ... to do up to five hulls that we already targeted for a three-year life extension with about 18 months in the depot.”

Pappano added that the final number won’t necessarily be five. He believes they will need to do at least two or three, but the service will plan for up to five.

“It is not an all-or-nothing decision,” he said. “It’s an incremental decision. As the strategic landscape changes, as the role changes, as our construction performance changes, we can evaluate that going along.”

The first sub likely to undergo the process would be the USS Alaska (SSBN 732) in fiscal 2029, which means planning to execute the service life extension would begin in the 2025 to 2026 timeframe, Pappano said.

The Navy is in the midst of a high-stakes transition between the Ohio-class and Columbia-class SSBN programs. The Navy purchased the first Columbia-class boat in fiscal 2021, and will procure the second in 2024, with the remaining 10 at a rate of one per year between fiscal 2026 and 2035.

The Navy's fiscal 2023 budget submission predicted that the first boat would be delivered in 2027 and the second in 2030. Under that schedule, the Navy's SSBN force would drop from 14 boats in fiscal 2026 to 11 boats in 2030-2032, according to a Congressional Research Service report. The Navy argues that operating with 11 boats will be acceptable during that period because all of the boats would be operational in those years, but it wouldn't account for an unforeseen event that would force an SSBN out of service for a period of time.