

Coast Guard, MARAD Budget Worries Still Acute While Navy, Marine Concerns Eased in 2018-19



Panelists at the Sea Service Update program May 7 at Sea-Air-Space 2019. Charles Fazio

NATIONAL HARBOR,

Md. – As the naval services tackle the overlapping challenges of trying to restore their readiness while preparing for a new era of “Great Power Competition,” perhaps their biggest concerns are receiving adequate funding and recruiting and retaining the talented personnel they need in the midst of a robust national economy with low unemployment.

While the money concerns are high for the U.S. Navy and the Marine Corps, after several years of constrained budgets, the problem is more acute for the U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. Maritime Administration, which have not benefited as much from the last two years of increased funding, officials from those services said in a May 7 session at Navy League’s Sea-Air-Space exposition.

The Navy’s biggest challenge is “maintaining stable and predictable budgets,” said Rear Adm. John Nowell, director of military personnel plans and policy on the

Navy staff.

Compared to low readiness the Navy endured in 2017 after several lean years, “with the money Congress has provided since then, we have been able to get at” the readiness low with higher operating hours, more maintenance and beginning to fill the manning gaps at sea, he said.

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Rear Adm. Linda Fagan, commander, Coast Guard Pacific Region

Brig. Gen.

Christian Wortman, commander of the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, said the Corps was challenged in maintaining the high personnel readiness it needed because of the intense deployment rate of its small force, but was “seeing the results” in better equipment readiness due to the budget gains in fiscal years 2018 and 2019.

But sustained funding improvement was needed to support the modernization that would provide future readiness required to face the Great Power Competition, he said.

“I wish I had the budget environment you described,” said Rear Adm. Linda Fagan, commander of the Coast Guard Pacific Region. Because the Coast Guard is part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, it hasn’t enjoyed the budget

boost the branches under the Defense Department received the last two years, Fagan noted.

She cited a \$1.7 billion backlog in facility repairs as a readiness issue and the “erosion of buying power every year” from constrained funding. “It is absolutely critical to stop the erosion of readiness we see today,” Fagan said.0

Shashi Kumar, deputy administrator of the Maritime Administration, noted the badly aged fleet of sealift ships that would be essential to supporting any major crisis deployment of U.S. forces, a shrinking number of commercial vessels MARAD leases and the growing shortage of qualified civilian mariners to operate those ships. He also worried about the rising cost of maintaining the ancient ships with limited funding.

All of the officials expressed personnel concerns – which for the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard primarily involve attracting young Americans with the intelligence and technical skills needed for the new era of high-tech warfare when the small numbers of those who can qualify for military service are in high demand in the private sector.

Fagan said the Coast Guard can recruit the talented and diverse personnel it needs but has

trouble retaining its female workforce. Nowell said the Navy still needs to fill 6,000 billets at sea, less than half its shortfall two years ago. Wortman said the Marines Corps has been able to sign up the 38,000 recruits it needs each year but is challenged to retain those with the unique skills – such as cyber – because of the higher pay that private industry can offer.

Kumar said MARAD's problems in finding and keeping qualified civilian mariners is aggravated by the shrinking American-flagged commercial fleet and the fact that much of the government fleet was on standby most of the time, limiting the trained personnel's ability to stay current.