Experts Voice Concerns at Forum Over Navy's 30-Year Shipbuilding Plan

The Navy's current 30-year plan to achieve a 355-ship fleet may be unworkable because it does not account for the rapidly growing cost of manning and sustaining the force, the almost certain cost overruns for new ship classes it plans to develop and the erosion of shipyard skills from not refueling the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman and delaying purchase of the next amphibious assault ship.

Those were among the problems with the Navy's shipbuilding plan and fiscal 2020 budget presented by five government and private-sector experts on naval issue at a Heritage Foundation forum April 15.

The speakers, who included Ronald O'Rourke and Eric Labs, the highly regarded naval analysts at the Congressional Research Service and the Congressional Budget Office, also cited concerns about the increased maintenance costs for the Arleigh Burke destroyers the Navy plans to keep in service an extra 15 years and the proposal to buy 10 large unmanned surface vessels without any firm idea of how they would be equipped or would operate.

Bryan Clark, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and a retired submarine officer, said the cost of manning and sustaining the fleet is growing faster than the rising cost of building a larger force, due to the concerns about gaps in ship manning and reduced ship readiness.

Because the planned future fleet will cost "way more to man and sustain … this plan may be unachievable or undesirable," Clark said.

O’Rourke also cited the growing cost of sustaining the fleet and Jerry Hendrix, vice president of the Telemus Group and a retired Navy officer, noted that the latest 30-year plan promises to reach the 355-ship fleet based on extending the service life of the early DDG-51s from 30 to 45 years, despite the historic record that for ships kept past year 30 the maintenance cost “increases significantly.”

Labs said another problem with the ambitious shipbuilding plan was the history of significant cost overruns for all the recent first ships in a new class of vessels, while the Navy wants to introduce six new ship types in the next five years.

O’Rourke and Labs listed the proposal to retire the Truman in 2024 rather than conducting the usual midlife nuclear refueling and overhaul to keep it in service for another 25 years as a major change in this year’s budget. Labs said that would take the carrier force down temporarily to nine and then back to 10 but would not sustain the 12 required by law for decades.

Labs said skipping the Truman refueling would deplete the Newport News Shipbuilding workforce’s knowledge on how to do that work and would reduce their ability to do refueling in the future. He also warned that the plan to delay the next LHA amphibious ship until 2024 would create a seven-year construction gap that would “impact the efficiency of the shipbuilding workforce.”

Early congressional hearings on the Navy’s budget indicated that Congress was not likely to allow the Truman’s early retirement.

Bryan McGrath, managing director of the FerryBridge Group and another retired Navy officer, said the plans to buy unmanned surface vessels and more small manned combatants, such as the new guided-missile frigates, would be a way to offset the higher costs of manning and sustaining the larger fleet. But

he noted that the budget proposal for the large unmanned ships did not include any details on what sensors or weapons they would carry and no concept of operations showing how they would be deployed.

O’Rourke and others said buying the unmanned ships was part of the new acquisition policy of acquiring new technology and putting it into the fleet quickly for testing.