F-35 Won’t Miss Full-Rate Production Target, Pentagon Official Says



A Marine F-35B refuels Aug. 18 at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa, Japan. U.S. MARINE CORPS / Lance Cpl. Karis Mattingly

ARLINGTON, Va. — COVID-19-related delays will not slow the planned March 2021 start of full-rate production for Lockheed Martin’s F-35 Lightning II strike fighter, the Defense Department’s top acquisition official says.

“I am confident we are going to meet the March date,” Ellen M. Lord, deputy secretary of defense for acquisition and sustainment, told a Pentagon press briefing on Aug. 20. “We have the entire government/industry team focused on that. I look forward to continued progress.”

Lord told reporters that she and Robert Behler, the Pentagon’s director of operational test and evaluation, plan to visit the Joint Simulation Environment (JSE) that tests the F-35’s capabilities against dense surface and air threats, at the Naval Air Station Patuxent River, in southern Maryland. That evaluation must be completed before full-rate production of the F-35 can be approved.

“There have been setbacks within the JSE from COVID-19. It is a close working environment,” Lord acknowledged. However, the JSF team moved quickly to follow all Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines to ensure a safe working environment, she said. “We have operations there at least six days a week, if not seven days a week, almost 24 hours,” she added.

While the challenge from the pandemic has been “significant,”

Lord said the F-35 team also has been working through the “technical maturation of simulating these threats. It’s an iterative process.” She and Behler were going to Pax River “to understand exactly where we are” in that process and to “make sure they have all the resources they need.”

Under low-rate production, more than 500 F-35s of all three variants – for the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force and eight partner nations – have been fielded so far. The Air Force F-35A and the Marine vertical takeoff and landing F-35B have flown in combat. The F-35C is the Navy carrier-landing variant.