

Geurts: COVID-19 Crisis Offers Opportunity to Strengthen Acquisition, Sustainment



James F. Geurts, assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition, during a 2019 technical conference. For a Navy League webinar on May 4, Geurts said acquisition and sustainment could emerge stronger from the COVID-19 crisis and that metrics are already ahead this fiscal year despite most of his workforce being on telework. U.S. Navy/John F. Williams

ARLINGTON, Va. – A top U.S. Navy official said acquisition and sustainment could emerge stronger, having withstood disruptions during the COVID-19 crisis.

Speaking May 4 as part of a Navy League webinar sponsored by IBM for small businesses in the defense industry, James F. Geurts, assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition, said he views the pandemic as a crucible, where there will be some delays in production and maintenance, but also as an opportunity to strengthen the system.

[See: Potential for 3-Month Slowdown in Defense Acquisition, DoD's Lord Says](#)

“What new opportunities does that enable for us to leverage?” Geurts asked. “If you would have asked me four months ago, ‘Could the team go 95%-plus telework, increase contract awards 33%, do so with 10% less contracts, and at the same time get their distance learning up by 65%, I would have laughed a little bit. And we’ve [achieved those metrics] in the last seven weeks.”

"I don't see it as much as a disruption to our future plans ... as an accelerant to our future plans," Geurts added. "The goal for us is, how do we come out of this stronger than we were, and how do we work now to increase the speed by which we come out of this."

Geurts cited the late April award of the FFG(X) frigate contract to Marinette Marine three months ahead of schedule, which brought the total of Navy contract awards \$25 billion ahead of the same point last fiscal year. By his recollection, this fiscal year is the first where all financial benchmarks have been exceeded.

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"So, I don't view it as much as a delay as an accelerant," he said. "We will continue to adapt as the warfighter requires. I don't see us having to adapt our programs in a major way. We're going to have to figure out how to capture in a bottle all the great things that have occurred in the last seven or eight weeks where we've gained this operational effectiveness and be thoughtful of where we're going to have to manage risk downstream. But in terms of drastic changes to programs or schedules, I don't see that."

Geurts said the biggest collective challenge will be how to operate if the virus lingers for a long time.

"We need to create a system that is resilient to disruptions," he said. "I'm actually very optimistic that this has been a good learning method for us as an enterprise. It's tremendously painful, horrible to see what is happening at the

human element, and I don't want to downplay any of that at the individual level or at the national level.

"What it has done is helped shine some spotlights on where we probably were not as aggressive as we needed to be and where we've got an opportunity to be more effective. We've got to be able to ride through disruption. That's what our Sailors, Marines and our nation expect of us, and that's where we've got to be focused."