Los Angeles SSN Life-Extension 'Creates Own Issues'

WASHINGTON — The ranking member of the House Armed Services Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittee said failure to fund extra Virginia-class attack submarines (SSNs) in 2022 and 2023 will aggravate the submarine shortage in the next decade, and a plan to extend the lives of five older Los Angeles-class SSNs has "its own set of issues."

U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-Conn., told an audience at the Hudson Institute, a Washington think tank, July 18, that the option of extending the lives of Los Angeles-class SSNs should be looked at carefully.

The Navy's SSN force stands at 53 boats today and is on track to decline to 42 in the mid-2020s. One plan to mitigate the decline is to fund three Virginia-class SSNs in both 2022 and 2023, when the submarine contractors Electric Boat and Newport News are building the first Columbia-class ballistic-missile submarine.

"If we don't do that, we're really going backwards," Courtney said, referring to the shipbuilding plan, now a matter of law, to build the Navy's fleet to 355 ships.

The Navy also is looking at extending the service life of up to five Los Angeles SSNs to help mitigate the gap.

"I'm not religiously opposed to that, but [life extension] creates its own set of issues," said Courtney, whose district includes Electric Boat. "These are old boats, built in the 1980s and '90s. They don't have the same capabilities that a Virginia-class [SSN] has. We have to refuel the reactor and you have to check the hull to make sure that it's okay.

They’ve been running hard in the decades they’ve been out there.

“There’s a whole separate issue,” he added. “Technologies change in terms of shipbuilding: where you get the spare parts, where you find the [blueprints]. This thing is not as easy as it sounds. It’s not like putting a quart of oil in your 10-year-old car and hope it runs for the next five years.”