Navy Officials: Dry Dock Availability Will Be Ready for Submarine Force Growth



The Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarine USS Jefferson City departs Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard after completing an engineered overahul to prolong the life of the submarine. U.S. Navy/Chief Mass Communication Specialist Amanda R. Gray

WASHINGTON – The Navy's officials in charge of shipbuilding noted a silver lining in the cloud of the service's upcoming trough in the force level of submarines in the fleet: a chance to keep pace on the maintenance backlog while the dry dock infrastructure is built up to handle the following increase in submarines.

Because of decisions made decades ago in the post-Cold War drawdown, the Navy is facing a decline in its submarine force in the mid-2020s as the Los Angeles-class attack submarines (SSNs) are retired. Until recently, the building of the Virginia-class SSNs, at one per year, has been too slow to replace the retiring Los Angeles class. The result is a deficit in the force level in the mid-2020s that risks being as low as 41 boats.

However, the Navy is looking at extending the life of several Los Angeles-class SSNs to help alleviate the shortage. Also, production of the Virginia class has increased from one boat per year to two, which by the mid-2020s will starting to help raise the force level.

On Dec. 4, the Navy awarded a five-year multiyear contract to submarine builders General Dynamics Electric Boat and Huntington Ingalls Newport News Shipbuilding to build nine Block V Virginia-class SSNs, two per year, with an option for a 10th. The two-per-year rate will enable the Navy gradually

to increase its submarine force structure.

The Navy is instituting its Shipyard Infrastructure Optimization Plan to improve the capacity and capabilities of its shipyards, including the upgrade of its dry docks.

“We’re going to take advantage as there’s going to be a little downturn as the submarine numbers go down,” said James F. Geurts, assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition, testifying Dec. 4 on Capitol Hill before a joint hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee’s subcommittees on seapower and readiness and management. “That will give us the spot to recapitalize so that as the numbers grow back up we will have all the capacity we need.”

“We’re going to build the dry docks along with the maintenance plan along with the growth in the fleet to make sure that we get the maintenance done on time, to get the dry docks done on time to support the maintenance we’re going to need down the road,” Vice Adm. Thomas J. Moore, commander of Naval Sea Systems Command, said in testimony before the subcommittees.

The Navy in recent years has departed from its usual practice of having nuclear submarine maintenance performed only in the Navy-owned shipyards to keep up with the maintenance backlog.

“We have sent some submarines to our nuclear submarine shipbuilders to do maintenance availabilities,” Geurts said. “Quite frankly, the performance there hasn’t been exactly stellar, either. A lot of that is the same issues we have in the public [Navy-owned] yards. You get a trained workforce doing maintenance that’s different from doing construction. It’s taken us awhile to get the training and proficiency up there.

“I foresee on the submarine side always wanting the capacity to do some of that work in the private construction yards

because that give us some surge capacity … and opportunities where we need to balance out workload.”