Sea Service Panel Gets Serious in Talk on Budget, Climate Change



U.S. Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard panelists participate in the Sea Service Update panel June 20 at the Navy League National Convention. David Livingston

NORFOLK, Va. – The U.S. Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard panelists that participated in the Sea Service Update panel June 20 at the Navy League National Convention prepared remarks focused on a multitude of recent document releases such as the National Defense Strategy, the National Military Strategy and the Coast Guard Arctic Strategic Outlook.

Remarks also focused on readiness; the importance of remaining forward-deployed; and many other probable talking points, but it was a host of questions fielded by longtime local defense reporter Mike Gooding that elicited perhaps the most interesting insights into how the services are preparing for the future.

Gooding touched on the government shutdown early this year, which saw the unprecedented scenario of the Coast Guard working without pay. He also asked panelists their thoughts on the Budget Control Act of 2011 that many expected would be short-lived but instead has brought with it sequestration threats for nearly a decade. Gooding wondered how the services were preparing

to weather the upcoming storm of another likely continuing resolution in September – a process where the services would remain funded at their current levels regardless of shifting program needs.

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Coast Guard Adm. Scott Buschman, the Atlantic Area commander, conveyed how many organizations, including the Navy League, stepped up to ensure the Coast Guard had extra support during the shutdown, but panelists made clear how untenable that situation would be in the future.

"I hope that doesn't happen again because it was a very stressful time for our women and men," Buschman said, a sentiment echoed by Navy Vice Adm. Bruce Lindsey, deputy commander of U.S. Fleet Forces Command. "We should never, ever do that again," Lindsey added.

As for dealing with continuing resolutions, Lindsey said he wanted to see more flexibility.

U.S. Fleet Forces manages a $12 billion annual budget. "It would be really nice if [Fleet Forces Commander] Adm. Grady had the authority to move less than 5% of the total operating budget without having to approach

Congress," he said. That would amount to $480 million – a substantial amount to make a difference. Grady "needs that authority," Lindsey said.

Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Mark Brilakis, commander of Forces Command, said stability in resources is critical to managing programs in the pipeline.

"A budget's a budget. Congress appropriates money and … you have a problem trying to push dollars around. I've had to cancel exercises this year because we don't have the funds to complete the schedule," Brilakis said.

He predicted there would be a continuing resolution this fall based on his years of experience.

"The sequester was a bad law, and everyone thought it'd get fixed," Brilakis said.

Gooding also brought up a recent Government Accountability Office report that came out this week, identifying that 46 of 79 Defense Department installations are at risk to a rise in sea levels.

Brilakis said there's a reason so much DoD land is under threat – the Pentagon bought marginal land on purpose because it was inexpensive. When Hurricane Florence hit Camp Lejeune, North Carolina last summer, it dumped 36 inches of rain, and many buildings there still have tarps on them and no air conditioning.

"We're not going to replace buildings where we had them before," he said.

Brilakis also said that Parris Island, South Carolina, is

“no longer tenable” – despite the generations that have trained there. “We have to start making historic decisions.”

Buschman’s forces are on the front lines of climate issues, with two historic hurricane seasons in recent memory. He said the Coast Guard must make tough decisions recapitalizing ships and instead use that money to repair critical infrastructure issues after storms. When the Coast Guard is rebuilding, the service is factoring in resilience so when the next big one hits, infrastructure can take the punch.

Lindsey concurred with the infrastructure challenges climate change could bring, stating he didn’t want the United States to have to face scenarios like the recent widespread power outages in South America, which could affect banking and other critical services.

“A lot of people think this is an issue with global warming. It’s a critical infrastructure issue,” he said.