

Unmanned Systems Cited as Key by Future of Aviation Panelists



The Navy has previously teamed the MQ-8 Fire Scout UAS and MH-60s helicopters in a squadron. Northrop Grumman.

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md.

– Future naval aviation will benefit from the fifth-generation F-35s,

manned-unmanned teaming and the possibility of greatly enhanced rotary wing

aircraft being developed under the Future Vertical Lift (FVL) program, a panel

of Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard officials said.

The naval

services also are focusing on improving the readiness of their existing

aircraft, and some types of aircraft are coming close to meeting the 80% readiness

goal set by former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, the officials told a forum on

the future of naval aviation at the Navy League's annual Sea-Air-Space

exposition May 6.

Lt. Gen. Steven

Rudder, deputy Marine Corps commandant for aviation, said the Corps' legacy

FA-18 Hornets hit the 80% readiness mark last week and were maintaining

availabilities in the high 70% rate. And the Corps' new F-35Bs were operating

in the 70% range during their recent deployments in the

western Pacific, Rudder said.

Angie

Knappenberger, deputy director for naval warfare, said the Navy conducted a study to determine what would be needed to improve readiness and found that “we wouldn’t get there unless we changed our processes.” They have had to improve their support infrastructure, which had suffered from the years of reduced funding under sequestration and on the spare parts supply system, she said.

Looking to the future, Rudder, Knappenberger and Vice Adm. Daniel Abel, the Coast Guard deputy commandant for operations and a veteran helicopter pilot, all cited unmanned systems they were looking to add.

“Autonomy is really hard, but there are some things you can do,” and they are seeing a lot of focus on manned-unmanned teaming, Knappenberger said. She cited the Navy’s teaming of the MQ-8 Fire Scout UAS and MH-60s helicopters in a squadron and will do the same thing with the MQ-4C Triton long-range UAS and the P-8A patrol aircraft.

Rudder said the Marines were narrowing their focus on requirements for their primary unmanned aircraft program, the Marine Air-Ground Task Force Unmanned Expeditionary

system, commonly called MUX, which is to be a large Group 5 rotary-wing UAS that can operate from amphibious ships. After initially looking at a wide range of capabilities, including strike, the Marines currently are leaning toward an early warning platform that could provide over-the-horizon surveillance and network communications for the expeditionary task forces.

Rudder said the Marines also are closely monitoring the Army-led FVL program, which is intended to produce a rotary-wing manned aircraft with much higher speed and range than current helicopters. Although the two prototypes being produced for the FVL program are a composite helicopter and a tilt-rotor, Rudder said the Marines' preference is a tilt-rotor because they know their tilt-rotor MV-22 Ospreys are fast and they want something that can keep up with them.

Abel said the Coast Guard has been testing contractor-operated Scan Eagle UAS on their national security cutters and are looking at other unmanned systems.