

Proposed 2020 Budget Promises Major Funding for Marine Aviation and Ground Combat Programs, Hurricane Repair



The fiscal year 2020 national defense budget unveiled March 12 provides substantial funding for the Marine Corps' major aviation and ground combat programs and promises help in repairing the heavy damage inflicted on its East Coast bases by hurricanes last year.

The proposed defense funding would buy 10 more fifth-generation F-35B strike fighters for the Marines, six CH-53K heavy lift helicopters, 56 Amphibious Combat Vehicles to replace the aged AAV-7s, additional Joint Light Tactical Vehicles, the advanced Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar, HIMARS rocket artillery systems and an early attempt to provide defenses against unmanned aerial vehicles.

Despite a robust Navy shipbuilding fund that would buy 12 ships and two large unmanned vessels, the proposed \$205.6 billion total Department of the Navy (DON) budget does nothing to advance the Marines' decades-long quest for 38 amphibious combat ships, holding the gator fleet at the current 33 ships. The five-year budget plan shows the next America-class amphibious assault ship, LHA-9, would not be bought until fiscal 2024, despite an urgent appeal by the amphibious shipbuilding coalition to avoid an eight-year construction gap that could wreak havoc on the shipyard.

The total proposed Marine Corps funding of \$45.9 billion provides for an end-strength increase of only 100, for a total of 186,200 active-duty Marines, and holds the Marine Corps

Reserves at the current 38,500. But that small gain in personnel is in keeping with Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Robert B. Neller's goal of focusing his resources on accelerated improvements in modernization and combat readiness, rather than more people.

And within the stable end-strength numbers are substantial changes in specialties, with some shifts from basic ground combat capabilities to "Marines with special skills," including special operations, and intelligence, electronic, information and cyberwarfare, the DON's budget book said. That reflects Neller's drive to produce "a more experienced, better trained and more capable force," the budget said.

Those personnel realignments are in response to the U.S. military's overall shift from nearly two decades of anti-terrorism and counter-insurgency fighting to preparing for the return of great power competition against peer adversaries.