

Navy Assumes 'Balanced' Risk of Strike Fighter Inventory with Super Hornet Curtailment



An F/A-18E Super Hornet launches from the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Brianna Thompson

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Navy is working to manage its strike fighter inventory by focusing on restoring grounded fighters while curtailing future procurement of the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet after 2021, Navy officials said.

The Navy is requesting 24 Super Hornets in the fiscal 2021 budget but has cancelled plans to procure 36 more beyond 2021.

In a March 10 hearing of the Tactical Air and Land Forces subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, Rep. Hartzler (R-Mo.) said the Navy has a shortfall of 49 strike fighters – more than the 44 strike fighter complement of a carrier air wing – and that the Navy's decision to curtail Super Hornet procurement "is creating too much operational risk in the near term."

Rear Adm. Gregory N. Harris, director of air warfare in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, said that ensuring enough fighters are coming out of depot-level maintenance while others are inducted into service-life modification (SLM) program is "a balanced risk that we are taking right now based on the current budget."

Commenting on the large amount of corrosion found on the first two Super Hornets inducted into the SLM program, James F. Geurts, assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition, said the Navy has

added to the program “so that we deliver a fully mission-capable airplane out of SLM,” including phase maintenance checks, “so when we hand it back to the wing and the squadron, it’s ready to go. Previous service-life extension programs have just done things to the airplane but not taken advantage of the fact we had the airplane all pulled apart.”

Geurts said that the Navy is working closely with Boeing “to productionize the service-life extension – not getting every airplane its own custom artisan activity. We need to get that in the production flow. So, some of the risk of shoving the F/A-18 down after [fiscal] ’21 will be taking advantage of that line to productionize to get to our goal of 40 airplanes a year through that SLEP line.”

Geurts also said the improved mission-capable rate of the current Super Hornet fleet “gives us additional ‘up’ aircraft to help balance that shortfall.”

He said it takes 18 months to get a Super Hornet through SLM, but his goal is to reduce that to 12 months.

He predicted that by 2029 the Navy would reach its full fighter inventory.

The U.S. Marine Corps, having inherited many of the Navy’s divested F/A-18C Hornets, has 275 Hornets on hand to meet an inventory requirement of 143, said Lt. Gen. Steven R. Rudder, deputy commandant for aviation.

“We have enough Hornets, we have enough [AV-8B] Harriers,” Rudder said. “The challenge for us is the transition [to the F-35] ... to maintain a 20 F-35 buy a year – at least – so we can stand up at least two squadrons a year as we go forward.”