

Navy Starting Dialogue for Future Surface Combatant USVs

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Navy is beginning to move forward on its plans for a force of future combatants that will include three types of unmanned surface vessels (USVs), a service official said.

The Navy “is just starting a dialogue with industry,” Capt. Peter Small, the Navy’s program manager for Unmanned Maritime Systems, said Jan. 15 at the Surface Navy Association symposium.

The Navy envisions the Future Surface Force to include a Large Surface Combatant, a Small Surface Combatant, a Large USV, a Medium USV and a Small USV. The concept is in the technology maturation phase of development.

Under the concept, a Large USV is envisioned to provide distributed fires. The Medium USV is envisioned to provide distributed sensing and communications relay. The Small USV – the Mine Countermeasures USV – would provide mine sweeping, mine hunting and mine neutralization.

The Large USV could be partially manned or optionally manned, Small said.

A draft request for proposals is expected to be issued for the Medium USV within the next two months.

The Office of Naval Research (ONR) currently is experimenting with the Sea Hunter medium-displacement USV, a vessel developed by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and turned over to ONR for further concept and technology development. A second Sea Hunter is being built by Lidos for the Navy.

Small said he expects the Sea Hunter to be transferred to the Unmanned Maritime Systems program office in the future and that his office is “working to extract all the information that we can.”

Small stressed that the Navy must be able to adapt and upgrade future USVs using a standardized architecture that will be streamlined enough to avoid complex intertwining as systems are added or changed.

Over the next two years, Small said, the Navy will develop the Unmanned Maritime Autonomy Architecture, which is intended to become a feature of future requests for proposals.

Small said the Navy is taking a “crawl, walk, run” approach to development of the future USVs and their command and control systems, stating that it needed to bring craft into service “such that we can learn along the way.”