

Sealift Command to Welcome New Navajo Class of Tugboats to Fleet



An artist rendering of the future USNS Navajo (T-TATS 6). U.S. Navy photo illustration.

NORFOLK, Virginia

– A new class of towing and salvage vessels will join the U.S. Navy’s Military Sealift Command (MSC) in fiscal year 2021.

“The new Navajo class replaces the Powhatan class T-ATF fleet tugs, which provide towing, diving and standby submarine rescue services for the U.S. Navy, and the Safeguard class T-ARS rescue and salvage vessels, whose mission includes, salvage, diving, towing and heavy-lift operations,” said Tim Schauwecker, MSC towing and salvage project officer.

“MSC and the fleet commanders will benefit by having new, state-of-the-art and highly capable platforms that can perform a wide range of missions ranging from towing and salvage, diving operations and submarine rescue,” he said.

The primary mission of the fleet tug is towing and submarine rescue with the secondary mission of salvage. Rescue and salvage ships conduct salvage with a secondary mission of towing. The Navajo class will combine the

capabilities of both classes into a single class for greater efficiency, Schauwecker said.

“This new ship class will ... eventually restore the towing and salvage fleet to an end strength of eight hulls.”

Tim Schauwecker, Sealift command’s towing and salvage project officer

“The major improvements include a significant bollard pull increase that will enable the ship to tow virtually any ship currently in the [Navy] inventory. The new ships include additional deck space to account for the requirements of the submarine rescue diving and recompression system, including transfer under pressure, a 40-ton heave compensating crane to assist with underwater salvage operations such as lifting aircraft wreckage out of the water, dynamic positioning, which provides the ability to automatically maintain position and heading in the water by using its propellers and thrusters despite the environmental conditions, and berthing for an additional 42 personnel [other than crew] in two- to six-person staterooms. The ship will also have modern automation and engineering systems that include environmentally friendly main propulsion diesel engines,” he said.

MSC search-and-rescue vessels have contributed to a variety of missions around the

world, including recovery efforts for John F. Kennedy Jr.'s plane crash, the USS Guardian grounding, TWA flight 800, Hurricane Katrina and the SS El Faro sinking.

MSC took delivery of the Powhatan class of fleet ocean tugs between 1978 and 1981. These ships were designed and built based on commercial offshore towing vessels and were manned by civilian mariners. Salvor and Grasp were commissioned in 1985 and 1986 and were sailed as USS ships by U.S. Navy Sailors. The Navy decommissioned the Safeguard class of salvage ships in 2006 and 2007 and transferred them to MSC, where they were redesignated as T-ARS and manned by civilian mariners.

According to the Congressional Budget Office's 2019 shipbuilding analysis, the procurement of the new Navajo class aligns with the Navy's plan to expand the fleet to 355 ships.

"This new ship class will bring a significant capability increase to the U.S. Navy and Military Sealift Command and eventually restore the towing and salvage fleet to an end strength of eight hulls," Schauwecker said.

Secretary of the Navy Richard V. Spencer announced in March the new class of ships will be named Navajo, in honor of the major contributions the

Navajo people have
made to the armed forces.

The lead ship will start
construction in May, with delivery of the first five ships in
fiscal 2021 and
2022, followed by one ship per year through 2025.