Navy Air Warfare Director: Strike Fighter Shortage Easing, Readiness Improving

WASHINGTON – The Navy and Marine Corps' strike fighter inventory shortfall is easing even as the Navy slows its aircraft procurement to pay some bills to improve readiness, the Navy's director of air warfare told Congress.

Rear Adm. Scott D. Conn, testifying April 10 before the Seapower subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, responded to a question from Sen. Maize Hirono (D-Hawaii) as to why the Navy's planned strike fighter procurement over the fiscal 2020 five-year Future Years Defense Plan (FYDP) was 289, compared with 308 planned in the 2019 FYDP.

"Quite frankly, some of the reduction in aircraft [was] to pay bills," Conn said, including getting "wholeness in some weapon systems."

"F-35 C2D2 [Continuous Capability Development and Delivery strategy] Block 4 came with a bill that we had to pay," he said, regarding the next phase of F-35 development.

"In terms of strike fighter inventory management, our lowest point based on PB20 [President's Budget 2020] is about a 51-aircraft deficit in [fiscal 2020]," he said. "That decreases to single digits by FY24. That is [being accomplished] through the F/A-18 procurement in PB20, the F-35C procurement in PB20 and also the service-life modernization effort, taking those Block II [Super] Hornets, making them Block III, getting them to 10,000 hours."

Conn said the Navy finally is in a position "of buying and producing more aircraft than we are burning up every year in

terms of flight hours. That’s going to allow us to get out of older airplanes, provide best-of-breed opportunities for the Marine Corps, to enable us to start to strike some of our old airplanes, [such as] Block Is that will never be Block IIIs. It provides enormous opportunity in this budget request.”

Conn also credited a sustainment system introduced in January in bringing the “‘best of industry’ to look at the various functions we do to maintain our aircraft – at the depot level, at the squadron level, how we do engineering, how we do supply – and we’ve seen some pretty good results from targeted focus in [Naval Air Station] Lemoore, California, and FRC [Fleet Readiness Center] Southwest [in Naval Station North Island, California].

He said the Navy has been able to reduce planned maintenance intervals for Super Hornets from 120 days to 60 days.

“And the quality of product is better,” he said. “It’s getting on the flight schedule in a week, let alone weeks or months. We’ve been able to reduce our turnaround time 40% for some of our highest degrader list [items]: generators, interrogators and displays in cockpits. We’ve been able to drive down backlogs in servo cylinders that were keeping our aircraft down. We had a backlog of 60 of those parts in January. We got it down to zero in March. All that is allowing us to improve the mission-capable rate.”

Conn noted that in January the Navy had about 257 mission-capable Super Hornets. “Last week, we had a high – a snapshot in time – of 304. 80% would be 320 of the roughly 400 [primary mission aircraft inventory].”