



## Government Leaders Talk Depots at DoD Maintenance Symposium

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Rear Adm. Mike Zarkowski, Commander, Fleet Readiness Centers, addresses the audience during a panel about Title X funding held Dec. 5 at the 2016 DoD Maintenance Symposium in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

**Albuquerque, N.M.**—The health of depots is crucial to our nation’s sustainment and readiness, but lack of funding, confused requirements and ineffective communication among stakeholders is threatening them, according to a panel on Title X funding held Dec. 5 at the DoD Maintenance Symposium.

Rear Adm. Mike Zarkowski, Commander, Fleet Readiness Centers (COMFRC), stressed early on during the event that partnerships are going to be key to keeping depots on track.

“Whether you’re uniformed, whether you’re civil service or whether you’re a contractor (or OEM [original equipment manufacturer]), these are the three legs of our milking stool that have been providing readiness in defense of this country most especially since 2001 and beyond,” he said.

COMFRC’s mission is to produce quality airframes, engines, components and support equipment, and provide services that meet the Naval Aviation Enterprise’s aircraft ready-for-tasking goals with improved effectiveness and efficiency.

Successful partnerships among Navy organizations, the wider government and the private



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sector are helping to ensure the various FRCs are able to meet their mission requirements. Private partnership is especially important at the depot level, with up to half of all work done by contractors. Naval Aviation is partnering closely with industry to solve readiness challenges, using readiness on the deckplates and flight lines as its driving measure of success.

To stay on track, COMFRC has set two strategic initiatives: Be ready to fight tonight; and keep our mind on the future. The Navy has many readiness challenges and gaps across its enterprise. Addressing the gaps requires adequate sustainment planning as well as the use of innovative tools and processes to advance readiness and sustain readiness, ensuring Naval Aviation maintains a technological edge. To complicate matters, personnel are dealing with aging facilities and aircraft while simultaneously having to keep the most technically advanced aircraft in history up and running.

“If the balloon goes up tonight, do we have enough aircraft with enough hours to answer the call?” Zarkowski posed to the attendees.

Fellow panelist Mark Van Gilst, director of logistics, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Logistics and Product Support, had some words of wisdom to impart to his Navy and other colleagues. The U.S. Air Force is the only service branch to violate Section 2466 (also known as the 50/50 rule, a U.S. Code that mandates not more than 50 percent of each military department's annual depot maintenance funding can be used for work done by private sector) twice. To avoid ever going through that pain again, they've made what Van Gilst called a “sea change.”

To start, the Air Force consolidated two departments and placed them under the Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition. “If we're not in compliance, the Secretary of Acquisition has to go talk to Congress,” Van Gilst said.

Program managers are now at the center of compliance, and planning is done upfront, a major change for the Air Force. Sustainment conversations have moved from the back third of all briefs to the front third, underscoring how it has grown in importance. The Air Force also worked to become more efficient. For example, resource expenditure is sometimes measured in dollars, sometimes in hours, depending on the policy driving certain measures. But the same number of hours in different aircraft can have very different costs. At the same time, through their earlier mistakes, “one lesson we also learned is when you get close to a violation, it's very hard to turn the Titanic,” Van Gilst explained. “So you end up doing things that aren't smart.” To compensate, The Air Force is making more decisions from a total business perspective.

However, being efficient is challenged by cumbersome regulation. Panelist Vickie Plunkett, a House Armed Services Committee professional staff member told the audience that the new National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) has more than 3,000 pages and 100 new



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acquisition provisions, not including several for small businesses.

“For every reporting requirement that we repealed, we probably added two more,” Plunkett said.

The NDAA does leave depot statutes in place, which she explained means Congress is willing to bear the cost of sustaining and supporting these facilities, but the challenge lies in determining the sufficient level of funding.

Legislators, and the military, also grapple with ensuring policy keeps up with technology and the ability to sustain adequate depot capabilities so that they remain a ready and controlled source of repair. The 50/50 is meaningless without funding. “Fifty percent of nothing is nothing,” Plunkett said. Later adding that, “Setting and validating requirements for depot-level maintenance and other sustainment needs has always been a weak link in the process.”

Congress has started to pay more attention, but there is still work to be done to convince some members that planning for sustainment should be done earlier in the process. The Defense Department hurts its own cause in some cases by not providing clear objectives, milestones and resources for items such as the product support manager career path. Even the delineation of program manager responsibilities versus those of product support managers is murky.

What is clear is that a skilled, competent workforce is critical to depot success, so the Fiscal Year 17 NDAA provides several new direct-hire authorities. Not everyone is convinced this will help the manpower shortage, but Plunkett believes there are areas of untapped recruitment among unemployed or underemployed skilled workers in various trades. Through all the methods available to it, Naval Aviation is committed to attracting, retaining and developing members of its maintenance workforce.

She also believes the military must better communicate policy needs to other stakeholders in the sustainment community, with access to technical data rates playing a key role in the sustainment life cycle. Explaining that all the changes in the new NDAA are very complicated, Plunkett closed by sharing that some options for sustainment are no longer available, and having everyone on the same page is important because history has shown how “foregone conclusions” have been extremely costly.

The Naval Aviation Enterprise (NAE) is a cooperative partnership of Naval Aviation stakeholders focused on sustaining required current readiness and advancing future warfighting capabilities at best possible cost. It is comprised of Sailors, Marines, civilians and contractors from across service branches and organizations, working together to identify and resolve readiness barriers and warfighting degraders.



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