

## Navy to Consider Buying Only One Littoral Combat Ship Design

The Navy is once again considering buying a single variant of the Littoral Combat Ship.

Undersecretary of the Navy Robert O. Work said cost constraints and other factors could force a down-select of the LCS designs, of which there are currently two. The Navy's current plan is to buy 55 LCSs. It would be a mix of two variants, one built by Lockheed Martin and the other by Austal Inc. The two companies are each expected to build 10 ships over the next decade.

Navy officials insisted that going back to one design is only a hypothetical, and that the service still stands by its dual-design procurement strategy.

"If one of the two ships has more problems than the other, you have another option and you can single up," Work said May 21 at a Cato Institute forum on the future of the Navy's surface fleet. "We like having two options. ... It may turn out that its better to single up [on LCS procurement], but that's not our plan right now."

The service's hand could be forced "if the bottom falls out of the budget" and the choice is required "for economy's sake," he said. Another factor would be "if we get both of them in the fleet and it turns out one or the other one is clearly superior, then we would make that decision," Work said. "Right now we're very satisfied with the plan to have two versions."

Lockheed's 377-foot steel mono-hull and Austal's aluminum-hulled trimaran both have experienced cost overruns. But it has been Lockheed's LCS-1 that recently has stirred controversy following the release this month of a Project on Government Oversight study highlighted structural problems with like "rampant corrosion and a stern door that you can fit your hand through," Ben Freeman, a national security fellow with POGO, said at the Cato forum.

"We learned of so many problems that we asked if the Navy should even use this ship," Freeman said. "It is true that the cracks have been fixed, but equipment failures continue to plague the ship." He suggested that the Lockheed design is the "weaker of the two variants."

Navy officials have been adamant that the LCS-1 problems were addressed and that the next ship in the class, LCS-3, has been vastly improved.

But critics are questioning whether the Navy really needs two designs. "Should we be purchasing two very different variants? I've yet to hear a convincing argument of why two variants of the ship are better than one," Freeman said. "Sure it's better for [shipbuilders] but for taxpayers ... I'm not sure it's a good idea."

The two ships recently arrived in San Diego, where for the first time they could be seen side by side. Unlike other dual-buy programs like the Ticonderoga-class missile cruisers, the differences between LCS-1 and LCS-2 are immediately apparent even to the casual observer.

"It is hard to imagine two ships that do the exact same mission looking more different," Freeman said. "Those differences go well beyond appearance and will be costly."

Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at Cato, said he had concerns about the dual-buy strategy "of two very different ships."

"This is two 27-ship classes, not one ship class," Preble said. "It is not unreasonable for those of us who are concerned about the cost to question why a down select was not executed the way it was supposed to be and to revisit that."

The question becomes at what point and by what criteria to make a decision to cancel one variant, Preble said. "They have different advantages, so if you singled up, which advantage would be given over the other," he said. "Then what would you build in lieu of the other ship."

Eric Labs, senior analyst for naval forces and weapons with the Congressional Budget Office, predicted the Navy would end up with at least 24 LCSs by 2015. "Then the Navy will have lots of options," he said, including buying fewer than 55 ships, redesigning the current variants, or canceling one design.

That left Work to defend the dual-buy strategy and the ship itself as a wise investment in the Navy's future surface fleet. It is a role he has played with gusto in recent months, calling those who doubt the ships effectiveness "nuts" and "dead wrong" during the Cato forum alone.

Work said the issues highlighted in the POGO report are either "flat wrong" or typical symptoms of a first-in-class ship that have identified and corrected. "These are [research and development] platforms," he said. "Of course there are problems. We built these to identify them."

Moving forward from LCS-2, systems will be identical on both ships, though their outward appearance and overall capabilities will differ, he said. With 27 ships in each class, both will be sustainable, he added. A single, interoperable combat system, command and control systems and training regimen will also help the two coexist, he said. Mission modules for the main capabilities — anti-submarine warfare, anti-mine warfare and as a platform for unmanned systems — will be “completely interchangeable” between the two variants, he said.

“Do we know everything about the vessel? No,” he said. “Are there going to be problems? Yes. ... But this is a learning Navy and a Navy unafraid to say it’s made a mistake.”

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