

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense

Members Day

March 15, 2016

Testimony

Of

The Honorable David G. Valadao

Representative for California's 21<sup>st</sup> District

Chairman Frelinghuysen, Ranking Member Visclosky, and the distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I am proud to be here testifying before you on behalf of California's 21<sup>st</sup> District and in particular the Navy warfighters who are stationed at Naval Air Station (NAS) Lemoore which I am fortunate enough to represent.

As you may know, NAS Lemoore is the West Coast's home basing for the Navy's most important tactical aviation. With more than 40 aviation tenants, including the Strike Fighter Wing Pacific and the Strike Fighter Weapons School Pacific, NAS Lemoore is critical to our operations in the Asia Pacific region. NAS Lemoore will soon be home to yet another squadron of F/A-18 Super Hornets and next year they will begin to receive the F-35C aircraft, becoming one of the first air stations in the Navy to do so.

During my time here in Congress, I have been honored to meet the men and women who serve at Lemoore and work with them on making sure they have the tools and resources necessary to be the most effective warfighters in the Armed Services. They serve their country with honor and distinction and I am committed to ensuring their missions are met with success.

I am testifying today to discuss the importance of the aircraft in which these men and women fly and maintain. Last summer I embarked aboard the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier. While aboard, I was able to witness the incredible aircraft that the pilots stationed at Lemoore fly on a daily basis in support of our critical operations in the Asia Pacific Region. The life blood of the Navy's air fleet is the F/A-18-E/F Super Hornet and these aircraft will soon be joined by the 5<sup>th</sup>-generation F-35C aircraft.

When they are not stationed at NAS Lemoore, the Super Hornets are the premier strike fighters for U.S. aircraft carriers deployed throughout the world. Whether it is against ISIS or the next conflict to arise suddenly, F/A-18s are the first aircraft on site ready to execute the mission until they can be supported by other forces.

Unfortunately, the Fiscal Year 2017 does not add sufficient number of Super Hornets to meet the Navy's demands. The Navy faces a tactical aviation shortfall of roughly ~36 Super Hornets. This shortfall results from incredibly high utilization rates fighting our enemies. Before this Subcommittee, the Secretary of the Navy testified that his top "unfunded requirement" is 14 additional Super Hornets to help address this shortfall. These aircraft will not only address the near term demand, but they will also fill the manufacturing gap until next year when the Navy plans to buy 14 more Super Hornets.

There is no greater responsibility in Congress than to provide resources for our national defense. This Subcommittee is always thoughtful about the decisions it makes. Even in these times of fiscal austerity, we must ensure that our men and women in uniform receive the training and equipment they need to defend the freedoms we as Americans enjoy every day.

I ask that this Subcommittee consider the Navy's top unfunded requirement of 14 additional Super Hornet aircraft. It will make a difference for NAS Lemoore and for the warfighter. As our nation continues the pivot to Asia, it is vital that we maintain superior air power.

I am proud that the Navy announced in 2014 that after carefully weighing the strategic, operational, and environmental consequences, that the Navy will base the F-35C aircraft at NAS Lemoore. I have been working with the men and women at NAS Lemoore as they prepare the air station for the arrival of the aircraft. We have been working on Military Construction projects that include expanded aircraft hangars, maintenance facilities as well as elite training centers to get our pilots up to speed on flying the F-35C. This is an exciting time for people of California's 21<sup>st</sup> District and those stationed at the base.

The F-35 program will serve as the 5<sup>th</sup> generation multi-role fighter for the US Navy, US Air Force, US Marine Corps, eight allied partners and currently three foreign military sales countries. It will allow our services and the services of our allied partners to recapitalize a rapidly aging fleet with next generation capability. For the Navy, the F-35 will be a critical provider of information to the Carrier Strike Group, providing superior situational awareness to both aircraft and ships in the Strike Group. Studies show that when you add F-35C's to the Carrier Airwing, the Airwing is more lethal.

NAS Lemoore will be the West Coast home base for a total of 100 F-35C aircraft. It will host seven Navy Pacific Fleet squadrons (10 aircraft per squadron) and the Fleet Replacement Squadron (30 aircraft) beginning in 2016. They will receive their full complement of F-35C aircraft by 2028. These F-35C aircraft will be the first 5<sup>th</sup> generation aircraft flown by the Navy and critical for the Navy to survive flying in an advanced threat environment. These multi-role aircraft will integrate with the FA-18 Super Hornet aircraft that operate at NAS Lemoore today.

The basing of the F-35C fleet is estimated to require 751 new military and contractor personnel for mission support, with an estimated \$35.5 million in annual payroll, this will inject much-needed economic stimulus into our suffering region. Basing the F-35C at NAS Lemoore will further result in an increase of about 68,400 operations per year at NAS Lemoore. The home basing of the F-35 aircraft will make NAS Lemoore a significant source of the Navy's strike power in the Pacific and enable our region to play a significant role in our nation's defense for years to come.

The Navy has had to make some tough choices in deferring buying F-35 aircraft in the numbers it should in order to accelerate the modernization of its tactical aviation fleet, but given the current geopolitical and international state of affairs, investing in 5<sup>th</sup> generation is not a luxury but a necessity.

The FY2017 Budget includes \$10.5 billion for the F-35 program, and yet the services have still identified a number of unfunded requirements to include 5 F-35As for

the US Air Force, 2F-35Cs for the Navy, and 2 F-35Bs and 2 F-35Cs for the US Marine Corps.

I would urge that the committee fully fund this program and support the unfunded requirements. These F-35 aircraft will be critical to ensuring that when operating in a contested airspace our men and women can return home.

The importance and value of NAS Lemoore to California's 21<sup>st</sup> District and the Central Valley cannot be questioned. The economic impact of the air station is estimated at close to \$1 billion and our local businesses and industries are proud to work hand in hand with NAS Lemoore. As I have stated before, it is an honor to be able to testify before you today and represent the men and women at NAS Lemoore and make sure they are provided the resources necessary to be effective warfighters.

Supporting both the F-18 and the F-35 programs is vital to ensuring our Navy does not experience a shortfall. As our nation continues its fight against ISIS as well as the growing number of diverse threats we face, we must do all that we can to maintain superiority in the air. We cannot afford to lose that superiority and I urge the committee to fully fund both programs.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.