

Illinois company says a floating OLF possible

Navy spokesman says platforms too costly, pose danger to pilots

By DAN PARSONS

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Versabuoy International claims to have developed a technology that would allow the Navy to float an outlying landing field offshore North Carolina, or anywhere, a company spokesman said Tuesday.

A modular floating platform system created by Versabuoy International — and fresh from trials in a test tank in Escondido, Calif., just months ago — can remain stable in the worst offshore weather, according to the spokesman.

Steve Khachaturian, chief executive officer of Versabuoy, said the platform components can be rigidly connected to form any size platform, including one large enough to provide the Navy with the 2,000 acres it needs to construct the core area of an OLF with its 8,000-foot-long runway.

“You can make it as big as you want,” Khachaturian said in a telephone interview Tuesday. “If what the Navy needs is 2,000 acres, there is no question that is a possibility.”

The proposal may be cost prohibitive. The acre-sized components cost from \$20 million to \$30 million each, depending on how much weight they are designed to support. Two thousand such components would therefore run the Navy from about \$40 billion to \$60 billion.

The estimated cost to acquire land and construct the facilities needed for an OLF on land is \$231 million, according to the Navy’s draft environmental impact statement released in February.

Once built, the platform could be moored to the sea bed with cables. Computers could be used to position the platform or move it to different locations, Khachaturian said. The system floats optimally in water 1,000 feet deep or more, Khachaturian said.

“You could make it a 2,000-acre ship if you wanted to,” he said. “Computers could do dynamic positioning and you could move it wherever you needed it. It wouldn’t be fast, but it would be mobile. And these things can stay in a hurricane, a typhoon, even with a rogue wave.”

In the 1990s, the Navy studied offshore basing using similar technology, but it couldn’t find a way to make the platforms stable enough for military use, Khachaturian said. The company has contacted the Navy about using the new technology for sea basing, he said. So far, the company has not landed any contracts regarding use of the fledgling technology, he said.

Articulated joints linking the platform surface to support buoys allows the new system to remain stable in heavy seas, according to the company’s Web site. The mobility of a module’s lower areas presents the unique opportunity to link multiple modules to provide large expanses of offshore “real estate,” according to the Web site. Khachaturian said that would allow construction of entire floating airports and is ideal for use in offshore drilling and renewable-energy operations.

“We got out of model tests only a few months ago, but we have proven that these things work,” he said.

“It’s just a question of time and building the first one.”

State Sen. Marc Basnight, who lives in Dare County, previously floated the idea of an offshore OLF to the Navy during its initial site-selection process. Several people have repeatedly suggested the Navy use an anchored, decommissioned aircraft carrier to train pilots instead of acquiring thousands of acres of farmland in North Carolina or Virginia on which to build an OLF for pilots to use to simulate carrier landings.

Navy Spokesman Ted Brown said Tuesday that an OLF needs to be located onshore to “provide a margin of safety for our pilots.”

“There’s a reason its called field carrier-landing practice,” he said. “Our new pilots do preliminary training onshore and more experienced pilots renew their training there before going out to sea. With an OLF, if you’re coming in too low, you avoid crashing into the back of the ship, which happens. If you’re too high, you just miss, instead of plunging into the ocean.”

Brown said all American military services are studying the possibility of offshore bases (based on technologies similar to Versabuoy’s system) that “could be towed into an area where we don’t have access.”

“But as far as I know, that is still pretty much conceptual,” he said.