



# The Air Force Should Rethink Its Plans for Sustainment Surge

**A**s potential threats to U.S. national security change, the Air Force must update its plans regarding the capabilities it needs to repair and maintain weapon systems. A key issue is the ability to handle *sustainment surge*—the increase in requirements to repair weapon systems and components to meet the operational demands of wartime or contingency operations. Given force planning scenarios, which anticipate an increasing variety of potential demands on the Air Force, are current sustainment surge plans and operations adequate? Are sustainment surge operations hindered by current legislation concerning what constitutes “core” government work and what can be contracted out? How can the Air Force improve its planning, contract management, and data collection to make sustainment surge operations more effective?

RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) examined these questions using quantitative sustainment data from depots and information obtained from interviews with depot personnel. Its researchers concluded the following:

- **Surge has become the norm, not the exception, but depots do not appear stressed.** Data covering operations from Desert Storm until Iraqi Freedom show relatively modest changes in production and personnel workload despite the fact that surge operations have become the norm. Depots are managing to deal with variation in requirements without large increases in employment or even overtime. Therefore, sizing depots for the massive increase in repair needs envisioned during the Cold War is not necessary.
- **Legislation does not limit surge workforce sources, but the laws regarding this issue are not well understood.** There is no restriction that surge work be performed in-house. However, many depot managers assume that there is and thus do not incorporate contractors into their surge planning. Industry is an untapped resource that can and should be incorporated into future surge plans. The Air Force should develop centralized guidance on how to manage contractors as a potential surge asset.
- **The Air Force requires better knowledge management systems to improve surge planning and execution.** With each depot having its own data systems, it is difficult to observe how operations at the local level feed into common planning, which in turn shapes local activities. The Air Force should design data systems and metrics around the information it needs to manage surge.

With improved methods of planning and execution, the Air Force can effectively meet today’s greater demand for repair and maintenance and can proactively prepare for future requirements. ■

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This research brief describes work done for RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *Rethinking How the Air Force Views Sustainment Surge*, by Cynthia R. Cook, John A. Ausink, and Charles Robert Roll, Jr., MG-372-AF (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG372/>), 2005, 110 pp., ISBN: 0-8330-3831-1. The complete report is available from RAND Distribution Services (phone: 310.451.7002; toll free: 877.584.8642; or email: [order@rand.org](mailto:order@rand.org)). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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