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Assignment 7



Environmentalists outraged at increased Navy training

Tuesday, December 14, 2010

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The Obama administration has approved a U.S. Navy plan to increase military training along the Northern Pacific Coast and many environmentalists are outraged. The Navy says it needs to try out new technology critical to national security, but critics say the training threatens whales and other species and they want the Navy to stay out of the most sensitive underwater habitat.

The Navy's northwest training range stretches from Humboldt County in Northern California up to the Canadian border and more than 280 miles west into the Pacific Ocean.

A Navy video shows the training that has been going on there for decades. Now the Navy wants more frequent exercises involving aircraft, submarines, and new advanced weapons -- such as underwater mine fields and air to air missiles.

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ABC7 spoke via satellite with John Mosher, the environmental program manager for the Navy's Pacific fleet.

"It's a wide variety of training events that are conducted, absolutely critical to the Navy's mission and to be ready to do that mission at any time," says Mosher.

But while they are doing that training, many environmentalists believe the Navy should also be doing more to protect the ocean from toxic chemicals, explosives and sonar.

"It's such a big range that the Navy is operating in up there. It's roughly the size of the state of California and they are not proposing to set aside even a square inch for important biological habitat for marine mammals," says Taryn Kiekow from the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The Natural Resources Defense Council is especially concerned about the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary - a treasure trove of biological diversity used by 29 species of marine mammals, including a pod of endangered killer whales.

When ABC7 asked, "Why can't the Navy just stay out of that area altogether, do you really need to be there?" Mosher responded, "Based on its proximity to where the ships and aircraft are based, out of Puget Sound, it doesn't make it practical to avoid it entirely."

The Navy environmental impact statement says the increased training could affect up to 130,000 marine mammals a year. They might be disturbed or harassed or injured in some way, but the Navy does not believe any will be killed.

Still, environmentalists are worried, especially about sonar which the Navy already uses in the Pacific Northwest.

"We know sonar harms marine mammals. We know that it disrupts behavior and feeding and mating and can lead to even injury and death," says Keikow.

The Natural Resources Defense Council helped produce a video which cites numerous cases in other areas of animals reacting strangely during sonar testing, sometimes washing ashore dead in the days that follow. The Navy does not expect that kind of result in the Pacific Northwest training.

Mosher was also asked, "Does some of the Navy's research show the sonar the Navy uses kills or severely injures whales?" He answered, "Under the operating parameters and the mitigations that are in place, generally not. The marine mammal would have to be extremely close to the sonar system to allow injury of that sort. So that's why we have mitigations in place that require powering down the sonar or shutting down the sonar if marine mammals are detected coming close."

The Navy uses shipboard lookouts to watch for animals that may be too close.

ABC7 then asked Mosher, "Whales can be underwater and tough to spot. Is that just a P.R. move to placate critics?"

Mosher said, "We feel it is a very effective mitigation right now with the information we have. It's not just a simple lookout on the deck of the ship, it's multiple lookouts and if we are using active sonar, then the number of lookouts is increased. The lookouts have very specific training in what to look for."

Only a small percentage of the training will be done off the Northern California Coast. Rep. Mike Thompson, D-Humboldt County, represents that area and agrees the Navy needs to train, but thinks the expansion is moving too fast.

"The Navy seems to think because they are the Navy and because they have a mission, that everything else be damned, that they are going to go ahead and do what they want to do," says Thompson.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, otherwise known as NOAA, has issued a permit for the increased training. However, at the same time, the agency is starting a comprehensive review of the effects of sonar. Thompson wants the Navy to wait for the results.

"The science has to drive this. I'm not willing to take a wink and nod from the Navy that everything is going to be fine, 'Just trust us,'" says Thompson.

The Navy told ABC7 they use the best available science and their training cannot wait. They also say they might change their procedures depending on what future research shows. The Navy will be holding public meetings in Fort Bragg and Eureka in the next two days to answer questions about the training.

Notice of Public Meeting 12/15 and 12/16 from Rep. Mike Thompson:

A representative from the United States Navy will hold public meetings regarding the Northwest Training Range Complex (NWTRC) on Wednesday, December 15th from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. at the Wharfinger Building in Eureka and on Thursday, December 16th from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. at Pentecost Hall at 822 Stewart Street in Fort Bragg.

The NWTRC is one of many Navy Range Complexes used for training of operational forces, equipment and other military activities. Based at Whidbey Island, near Puget Sound in Washington, the Navy has been training in the NWTRC since World War II. The bulk of the air, surface and subsurface activity takes place in waters off the state of Washington but the scope of influence covers approximately 122,400 nautical miles and extends from Washington to the southern tip of Humboldt. Training exercises vary in scope and effect, and in California are carried out between 12 and 250 miles offshore.


Written and produced by Jennifer Olney

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