Locals to Navy: Don't assault whales with sonar

By FRANK HARTZELL Staff Writer -

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For more than five hours last Thursday, Dec. 16, a large and often boisterous crowd at Fort Bragg's Portuguese Hall criticized the U.S. Navy's plans for increased training off the Pacific Northwest. At the request of Congressman Mike Thompson, the Navy sent representatives to both Eureka and Fort Bragg last week, although Fort Bragg is south of the Northwest Training Range Complex.

Seven representatives from the Navy, including a uniformed attorney, Lt. Cmdr. Joan Malik, stood among explanatory signboards, answered questions and talked with the public one on one.

Protesters gathered before the meeting, giving speeches pledging to stop the expanded training program. They carried banners that read "Stop the war games," "No sonar!" and "What color does a whale bleed?"

The Navy's Northwest Training Range Complex has been in use since just after World War II. It is about 122,000 nautical square miles, stretching from the Olympic Peninsula in Washington to the northern border of Mendocino County.

An environmental impact statement on the increased exercises was completed in September and totals several thousand pages.

The Navy plans to increase how often training happens at sea and in the air, but not send out any more ships or planes, Navy spokesman John Mosher said.

Training in the southern part of the range occurs only beyond 12 nautical miles from shore, with most happening 50 nautical miles out. The Navy uses the areas off that part of the range only about four times per year, Mosher said.

Training with active sonar is critical to being able to detect modern submarines. While sonar operators use simulators to train as well, that is not enough, Mosher said.

Many in the crowd challenged the notion that the Navy still needs to be preparing for fighting a Soviet style enemy, with references to attacks by "Iranian undersea forces."

Mosher conceded that current world hot spots might not involve submarine warfare.

"The Navy always needs to be trained for other missions, other areas can come up on short notice ... There are a lot of modern submarines around the world improving in their technology," Mosher said.

Killing not permitted

Mosher made a list of myths and misconceptions about Navy activities in the NWRTC, focusing on the fact the document does not authorize the mass killing of marine mammals — or any killing.

"The Navy and the National Marine Fisheries Services do not anticipate any deaths of marine mammals because of the training, no deaths of marine mammals, zero, none are authorized, we are not permitted to kill marine mammals," Mosher said.

Mosher's attempts to explain the different kinds of "takes" were interrupted by hoots and shouts from...
the audience. He said the terminology belongs to federal ocean agencies, not the Navy.

Mosher said 13 injury level takes to whales are allowed each year. The larger numbers come from "Level B Takes" which can include temporary injury or behavioral alterations.

Mosher said a total of 108 hours of sonar use are allowed under the environmental impact statement. He said that was a maximum, and the actual number could be less.

The Navy wasn't able to answer many important questions about sonar and whales. The environmental impact statement concedes there have not been enough studies to understand how the widespread use of sonar could effect marine mammals.

Credibility gap

The meeting suffered from credibility and information gaps. Credibility gaps because of past lies by the U.S. military to the American people were cited by several local critics. There were information gaps because it was obvious that few in the audience had actually read much, if any, of the thousands of pages of information the Navy has posted online about the NWRTC.

One member of the audience told the naval panel to expect pain in their personal lives from the act of murdering whales.

"A lot of people feel fervent about this issue ... people calling out from the audience, interrupting," said Fifth District Supervisor-elect Dan Hamburg. "It's really hard for us who live here and love the coast so much to keep the kind of decorum that some people might think would be good."

MCTV filmed meeting

Public access television station MCTV, Channel 3, has provided a record of the entire meeting, from the protest outside starting at 5 p.m. to the end after 11 p.m.

"This type of coverage really wouldn't happen without us," said Elizabeth Swenson, director of MCTV.

"There are individuals who could and did record some of the meeting, but for an individual to cover a whole meeting like this is really difficult; it takes more than a camera and some tapes."

Swenson is working on producing a follow-up program seeking to continue the tremendous investment of community energy.

"I believe it is important to record meetings like this as I think part of our role is to record our history and the Navy meeting here seems important historically," Swenson said.

Online

The environmental impact statement is online at www.nwtrangocomplexeis.com/EIS.aspx.

MCTV's video of the meeting is online at http://mendocoasttv.org.