

Navy plan to increase warfare training off Oregon coast draws objections

by Scott Learn and Lori Tobias, The Oregonian

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Anthony Madina/U.S. Navy Tugboats tow

the nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine USS Alabama through Puget Sound in 2006, with Mount Rainier in the background. Submarine exercises would increase under the Navy's plan for more training off the Pacific Northwest coast.

You may not realize it, but the Navy has been conducting warfare training exercises off the coast of Oregon, Washington and Northern California for decades, firing missiles and machine guns, dropping bombs and practicing crucial sonar detection of submarines.

Now, the Navy's Northwest region wants to expand those operations, including adding a dummy minefield-avoidance training course, scheduling hundreds more training flights and warfare simulations over land and sea, and increasing the use of sonar -- a potential threat to endangered and threatened whales and other marine mammals.



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Environmental groups, fishermen and some politicians along Oregon's coast are wary. They also say the military sprang the 1,000-page environmental review of its training plan with little notice.

The Navy held one Oregon meeting on the draft proposal last week, and comments are due Wednesday. But activists want a 30-day extension.

"For the whole state of Oregon, there was one 90-minute hearing," said Marie Gargano, a Depoe Bay retiree active in environmental issues. "It just looks like a pro-forma effort to meet the requirements of the law."

Sheila Murray, environmental public affairs officer for the Navy's Northwest region, said the Navy put notices in two small, coastal Oregon papers and notified numerous politicians and state regulators.

"We do want public comment," Murray said. "That's how we're able to have this work. We're not out to hide anything."

The Navy's environmental review, prompted by pressure from environmental groups, is its most detailed public examination of Northwest training exercises since they began more than 100 years ago. The draft environmental impact statement, released Dec. 29, concludes that expanded training won't harm marine life or the public.

The Northwest fleet -- including two aircraft carriers, 10 warships, 14 submarines, 90 support vessels and 119 aircraft -- comes from five installations in Washington state.

Expanding training is crucial, the Navy says, particularly practicing submarine detection and electronic jamming of enemy signals on the fly.

The service also plans to increase more-traditional training. For example, missiles fired would jump from 10 to 57 a year, the review says, and the number of gun shells fired from ships would more than double, topping 50,000 annually.

That may sound like a lot, but the Navy review says it's minimal given the vast expanse of ocean the training occurs in and the ocean-disturbing activities already going on, from fishing to shipping to polluted water runoff from land.

Most of the flights will take place at high altitude or far from shore, Murray said, and the munitions firing will almost always be in remote areas. "Basically, what people see and hear now is what they're going to continue to see and hear," she said.

But Zak Smith, a Natural Resources Defense Council attorney, is skeptical of the military's claims. Once the Navy wins approval of its training plan from environmental regulators, it won't have to air the plan again, barring significant changes, he said.

"This is a one-time opportunity for people to let the Navy know what they think," Smith said.

The biggest environmental concern is the Navy's use of midfrequency active sonar, which would increase under the plan.

Environmental groups are suing over such sonar use, arguing that it damages whales and other marine mammals that use sound to communicate and navigate.

The training area includes waters used by nine marine mammal species listed as threatened or endangered, including seven whales. Of particular concern are Puget Sound's southern resident killer whales, whose population has dwindled to about 70.

In its review, the Navy said sonar exposure contributed to five "mass stranding events" worldwide since 1996, with whales showing up dead in numbers on the beach.

The review says the increased training would boost potentially harmful mammal sonar exposures from about 110,000 a year to nearly 130,000. But it predicts little damage, in part because the Navy limits sonar use when mammals are spotted near ships and submarines.

Sonar is crucial for submarine detection, the report said. Forty nations operate modern submarines, it said, including Iran and North Korea.

But Bruce Mate, director of the Marine Mammal Institute at Oregon State University, says there's not enough information on the location and timing of sonar use to assess the risk.

The Navy rejected the idea of seasonal shutdowns or avoiding key habitat areas.

For fishermen, the concerns are more economic, said David Jincks of Newport, president of the Midwater Trawlers Cooperative.

They range from munitions debris tearing up nets to longer closures of the large swaths of ocean.

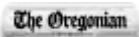
"I'd just like the Navy to come back and answer some questions," Jincks said.

To see the draft report and submit comments, go to www.nwtrangecomplexeis.com.

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