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From: Lolita C. Baldor, Associated Press
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Navy to Use Sonar That May Affect Whales

WASHINGTON — Federal regulators granted the Navy a permit Tuesday to use sonar in a maritime exercise despite environmentalists' concerns it could disturb or even kill whales and [dolphins](#).

It was the first such permit granted to the Navy, and one environmental group, the Natural Resources Defense Council, said it would file a lawsuit Wednesday to prevent the sonar's use.

The monthlong exercise, which includes anti-submarine training, involves naval forces from eight nations. It began Monday off the Hawaiian Islands. The sonar part of the exercise begins after July 4 and lasts three weeks.

The National [Oceanic](#) and Atmospheric Administration gave the Navy a permit to use mid-frequency active sonar, which can affect marine [mammals](#)' behavior. In documents released Tuesday, NOAA determined that the exercise would cause no significant [environmental impact](#).

NOAA also concluded that the Navy's use of the sonar was not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of threatened and endangered species -- including the Hawaiian monk seal -- in the exercise areas.

"The Navy and NOAA have worked hard these past several months to take the appropriate measures necessary to avoid harming marine life while also ensuring the realism of this vital multinational exercise," said Navy Rear Adm. James A. Symonds, director of naval [environmental programs](#).

But the NRDC said using the sonar would be illegal.

"It is absurd to designate an area a Marine National Monument one week, and then authorize the Navy to blast it with high-intensity sonar the next," said Joel Reynolds, a senior attorney at NRDC and director of its Marine Mammal Protection Project. "It is possible for the Navy to train effectively without needlessly inflicting harm on marine life, and that is exactly what federal law requires."

The ships using the sonar would not be inside the national monument area, that President Bush designated in early June, in the waters off the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Instead, according to the Navy, the sonar would be used in waters surrounding the main Hawaiian Islands.

Navy spokesman Lt. Ryan Perry said the exercise is critical to national security, and specific steps will be taken to avoid or minimize any effect on marine life.

The exercise is designed to train sailors to detect and hunt stealthy submarines -- a top priority of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. Hawaiian waters provide the opportunity to realistically train for a variety of crises, Perry said.

Perry said the sonar operators will reduce active sonar power by 75 percent if a marine mammal is spotted within 1,094 yards of the ship, and drop it further if mammals are detected within 547 yards. They will turn off the sonar if the mammal is detected within 219 yards.

Earlier this year, NOAA said the sonar used during the Pacific Rim exercise in 2004 may have contributed to the mass stranding of more than 150 melon-headed whales in Hanalei Bay, Kauai. NOAA's study concluded the whales -- which usually inhabit only deep water -- may have heard the signals and headed into the shallow water.

While there was no conclusive finding, NOAA asked the Navy to reduce its sonar's power during this summer's exercises, and also asked the Navy to turn off active sonar when the whales come within a set distance.

The naval exercise runs from June 26 to July 28, and the sonar would be used for a three-week period.

Source: Associated Press

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Website :

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