PEARL HARBOR, Hawaii — The Navy asked a federal appeals court Wednesday to block a court order that prevents it from using active sonar during its war-game exercises off Hawaii, an environmental group said.

The emergency motion, filed in the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, seeks a stay on an order stopping the Navy from using the high-intensity sonar, said Daniel Hinerfeld, spokesman for the National Resources Defense Council.

The Navy was forced to abandon plans to use mid-frequency active sonar during the international maritime exercises after a federal judge issued the order. Environmentalists had sued, claiming the sound waves might kill or harm marine mammals.

The U.S. Pacific Fleet referred calls to Navy officials in Washington. Officials there did not immediately return calls.

A senior Navy admiral said earlier Wednesday he was hopeful the military would settle differences with environmentalists so his sailors could use active sonar during the exercises.

Sailors use active sonar by pumping sound waves through the ocean to hunt submarines.

The federal judge on Monday had ordered the two sides to discuss measures to minimize the impact sonar would have on marine mammals. The Navy and the plaintiffs, led by the Natural Resources Defense Council, are due to appear again in Los Angeles federal court on July 18.

"We're hopeful through further discussions there will be some relief down the road," said Vice Adm. Barry Costello, commander of the U.S. Third Fleet and director of the drills.

Costello said the Navy's ability to defend U.S. interests depends on its sailors learning to use active sonar and regularly practicing their skills.

"It's a national security issue to prepare for the next fight. And you cannot win in the future if you don't train against the threat," Costello told reporters as about 20 ships prepared to sail from Pearl Harbor for the exercises, which involve close to 40 ships and 19,000 sailors from eight nations.
The Navy plans to have its sailors listen for submarines only with passive sonar and visually look for "enemy" submarines during the drills.

Active sonar locates objects by analyzing sound bounced off them, while passive sonar involves analyzing noises generated by the objects. Environmentalists say active sonar may kill or harm whales and other mammals, possibly by damaging their hearing.

Source: Associated Press

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