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Press Release

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Coalition Warns Navy Over Destructive Use of Mid-Frequency Sonar

Conservation and Animal Welfare Groups Decry Needless Harm to Whales and Other Species; Request Talks After Latest in String of Sonar-Linked Whale Deaths

LOS ANGELES (July 15, 2004) - A coalition of conservation and animal welfare groups yesterday threatened to take formal action against the U.S. Navy unless it agrees to adopt common sense measures to mitigate harm to marine mammals and fish caused by the Navy's use of mid-frequency, high intensity active sonar. The coalition includes NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council), The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), The Humane Society of the United States (The HSUS) and Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ocean Futures Society.

In a 13-page [letter](#) sent Wednesday to Navy Secretary Gordon England, the coalition detailed numerous mass strandings and mortalities of whales associated with the Navy's testing and training with mid-frequency sonar systems. According to the coalition, the Navy's largely unmitigated and unpermitted use of mid-frequency active sonar regularly violates provisions of several federal statutes enacted to protect marine species and the environment, and belies the Navy's own commitment to environmental stewardship.

Nearly 60 percent of the Navy's 294 ships and submarines are equipped with mid-frequency sonar systems, which can generate sounds well above 215 decibels. Intense blasts of mid-frequency sonar can -- either directly or indirectly -- damage vital organs and cause internal bleeding in marine mammals, according to an article last year in the scientific journal "Nature."

Last year, the Navy agreed to scale-back deployment of a different kind of sonar system, which uses low-frequency sound waves, after losing a [lawsuit](#) brought by groups in the coalition. In that case, a federal court ruled that the Navy's permit to use low-frequency sonar violated the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) because it did not adequately assess or take steps to mitigate the risks posed by the system to marine mammals and fish ([click here](#) for details).

The Navy's ongoing use of mid-frequency sonar violates the very same laws but on a much larger scale, according to the coalition.

"There are effective ways to reduce harm to marine life that do not interfere with military readiness," said Joel Reynolds, a senior attorney and director of NRDC's Marine Mammal Protection Project. "The Navy is needlessly endangering whole populations of marine mammals. We'd rather not resort to litigation, so we are once again asking the Navy to sit down to discuss this in a spirit of cooperation. The Navy can no longer ignore the unnecessary infliction of harm associated with this technology."

The Navy failed to respond to previous requests by NRDC for talks about ways to reduce the impacts of its sonar programs. The coalition's action came two weeks after U.S. and Japanese naval training exercises off the coast of Kaua'i, Hawai'i coincided with a stampede to shallow water by a pod of up to 200 melon-headed whales, and the stranding death of one ([click here](#) for details). Melon-headed whales (which resemble dolphins) usually stay in deep water. The war ships -- participating in the biennial Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) tactical naval exercises -- shut off their active sonar after learning of the stampede, but the exact sequence of events remains unclear.

"Right now nobody knows if sonar is to blame, but this incident was similar enough to previous stranding events caused by sonar that we think the Navy needs to investigate it thoroughly and transparently," said Dr. Naomi Rose, marine mammal scientist for The HSUS.

Mass stranding and mortality events associated with mid-frequency sonar exercises have occurred, among other places, in the Haro Strait off the coast of Washington State (2003), the Canary Islands (2002, 1989, 1986, 1985), the Bahamas (2000), Madeira (2000), the U.S. Virgin Islands (1999, 1998), and in Greece (1996). Some scientists suspect that the majority of marine mammals harmed by sonar do not strand, and therefore are never counted.

"Without reasonable limits, the proliferation of high intensity sonar will cause excruciating pain, injury and death for an increasing number of marine mammals," said Frederick O'Regan, president of IFAW.

Marine mammals depend on sound to navigate, find food, locate mates, avoid predators, and communicate with each other. Blasting their environment with intense sound over large expanses of ocean disrupts these critical behaviors and may threaten their survival.

"We owe it to our children to be better stewards of the environment by protecting our ocean friends and their ecosystem," said Jean-Michel Cousteau, founder and president of Ocean Futures Society.

There are many ways the Navy should consider mitigating harm to marine mammals from mid-frequency sonar exercises, according to the coalition. They include identifying low-risk areas for routine training consistent with mission demands; establishing safety zones around transmit vessels; and reducing the source level of sonar signals.

The scientific journal "Nature" reported last fall that intense, active sonar may kill certain marine mammal species by giving them decompression sickness or "the bends" -- the same illness that can kill scuba divers who surface too quickly from deep water. The international team of scientists that authored the study said compressed nitrogen apparently formed large bubbles in the tissue of whales exposed to intense active sonar, damaging their vital organs and causing internal bleeding and possibly intense pain.

For more information about the other organizations in the coalition, please visit their web sites: [International Fund For Animal Welfare](#); [The Humane Society](#); [Ocean Futures Society](#).

The Natural Resources Defense Council is a national, nonprofit organization of scientists, lawyers and environmental specialists dedicated to protecting public health and the environment. Founded in 1970, NRDC has more than 1 million members and e-activists nationwide, served from offices in New York, Washington, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

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