Navy tests off West Coast to endanger whales, environmentalists fear

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By The Associated Press

Environmentalists worry that plans to expand Navy testing off the Washington, Oregon and California coasts will pose a danger for whales.

A proposal for increased sailor training and weapons testing, as well as underwater minefield training for submarines in the Navy's Northwest Training Range, has been approved by the Obama administration.

The area — 122,400 nautical square miles of space, equal roughly to the size of California — has been used for Navy training since before World War II.

The Bellingham Herald reports environmentalists are concerned about plans to expand training there.

In a letter to the Navy, the Natural Resources Defense Council said the plan "would pose significant risk to whales, fish and other wildlife." The council is concerned about hazardous materials in the water from both spent and unexploded weapons.

Environmentalists worry about the safety of the 150 orcas known to live in the Puget Sound and along the Pacific coastline from Washington to California.

"They're all very susceptible," said Howard Garrett, the president of Orca Network, a nonprofit group based in Washington state. "The Navy is single-minded and they're focused, and the whales are very much a secondary concern to them."

The group is among the many opponents in Washington and California lining up against the Navy's plan.

Navy officials have been assuring the public that the marine life will be safe.

"We are not even permitted to kill even one marine mammal. ... What people don't seem to understand is we share the environment with everybody," said Sheila Murray, a Navy spokeswoman.

"It's our environment, too. Of course we want to take care of it. The Navy goes to great lengths to protect the marine environment."

Of the Navy's expanded operations at the site, Murray said: "This training is important. It allows naval forces to be prepared."

Opponents fear that missile and sonar testing and the dumping of depleted uranium could hurt the whales.

The Natural Resources Defense Council worries the Navy will release hazardous materials into coastal waters, including "thousands of rounds of spent ammunition and unexploded ordnance containing chromium, chromium compounds, depleted uranium" and more.
The council also believes the midfrequency sonar used to detect submarines and underwater objects interferes with whales' ability to navigate and communicate, and that the chronic noise can interfere with whales' brain development and depress reproductive rates.

"I'm not convinced by the assurances that the Navy gives that there will be no effect," Garrett said. "I can't imagine that there won't be mortalities."

Murray called that a myth.

"The Navy's been training on that range since before World War II: 70 years. Nobody was even aware that the Navy was there. And if what they were saying was true, they would see dead marine mammals floating up on shore. It's not true," Murray said.