

Archived Story

Posted: Feb 13, 2009 - 10:12:36 PST



Skipper Brett Hearne fixes a net aboard the 75-foot F/V Last Straw on Wednesday afternoon. In the wake of the recent scuttlebutt surrounding the U.S. Navy's desire to escalate training activities off the Oregon coast, Hearne - a commercial fisherman since 1978 - contacted the News-Times about a piece of Navy ordnance his crew netted along with 42,000 pounds of fish during a recent sea sojourn. He also pondered the viability of commercial fisheries, which face growing competition for ocean territory from the Navy's training range, marine reserves, wave energy projects, and more. (Photos by Terry Dillman)

Navy's tactics worry fishermen By Terry Dillman Of the News-Times

Brett Hearne has plied the ocean as a commercial fisherman since 1978, but he isn't sure how much longer he and fellow

fishers can hold out.

The skipper of the F/V Last Straw is worried about what he thinks could become the last straw for commercial fishing as competing uses - current and future - jostle for ocean territory. And he wonders whether the \$1 million he invested in his 75-foot trawler last year can reap needed dividends, given current economic conditions and the possible loss of fishing grounds to proposed marine reserves, wave energy projects, fish farms, and more.

The latest salvo from the U.S. Navy, which wants to escalate activities within its Northwest Training Range Complex (NWTRC) off the coasts of Washington, Oregon, and northern California dredged up those worries, and prompted Hearne to call the News-Times about a piece of naval detritus his crew hauled in during a recent sojourn at sea. They're not exactly sure what the three-foot-plus, barnacle-encrusted aluminum canister is, but speculation based on serial, bar code, and other numbers from it range from a mortar casing to an aircraft cylinder used to launch missiles.

"We drag about 40 days out of the year," Hearne said. "And we haul in about three to four pieces like this per year."

The Navy junk gets tangled in the trawl nets and it can, depending on shape and size, wreak havoc with nets and other equipment. Other Navy activities can have more dire consequences.

During a Jan. 30 public hearing the Navy conducted at Oregon State University's Hatfield Marine Science Center pertaining to a required Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) related to their proposed range activity expansion, Lincoln County Commissioner Terry Thompson (after noting he had logged more than 4,200 days at sea as a commercial fisherman) talked about the loss of at least eight fishing vessels and 15 crew members "due to submarine activities." A submarine caught in a trawl net is the only thing he said could explain a 75-foot vessel being dragged sideways at eight knots.

Economic impact was another concern.

Thompson noted the \$100-million economic boost commercial fishing provides "just in Lincoln County," and said the potential for anything - such as the small-scale practice minefield mentioned in the DEIS - that could keep fishermen out of prime fishing grounds was bothersome. He also cited the shells and other debris the Navy "leaves behind" after training exercises.

"Our fishing industry has done a lot to try to clean up the bottom of the ocean, and for the Navy to leave debris on the bottom is not good," he said.

Hearne and crewman Joe Mayer, who has 10 years in as a commercial fishermen but is experiencing his first ventures aboard a trawler, agreed. They also backed Thompson's contention that the Navy "doesn't have a very good understanding of the fishing industry." As an example, Thompson pointed to the DEIS section about the fishing industry that he said fails to make a major distinction between trollers and trawlers. He suggested they "get with some commercial fishermen" then rework that DEIS section.

Hearne considers that highly unlikely. In fact, he scoffed at the notion of having to send public comments about the DEIS directly to Navy personnel. To him, it was akin to using sea lions to guard a hold full of fish.

Hearne, Mayer, and many others remain concerned about the potential impacts to fisheries and marine life, despite the Navy's

prediction that - while the potential exists to economically impact commercial fishing from the increased use of sonar, a portable undersea tracking range, and underwater training minefield - the escalation of war games within the range would have "no socioeconomic effects" on commercial shipping and fishing interests, sport fishing and diving interests, or tourism activities.

The NWTRC provides land, air, and sea training for the nation's third largest concentration of Navy forces based in Washington's Puget Sound. It extends 250 nautical miles (about 288 miles) into the Pacific Ocean from the shoreline, encompassing more than 126,000 square nautical miles of ocean. It also covers more than 34,000 square miles of airspace, and 875 acres of land.

At the Jan. 30 hearing, newly appointed Port of Newport commissioner David Jincks, representing the Midwater Trawlers and Pacific Whiting cooperatives, referred to the "tremendous amount of fishing that goes on out here all the time." Because the changes Navy officials are considering "could have a very large impact, but we don't know yet how extensive it could be," he asked for "more coordination with the fishing industry" to get feedback from the fishermen "who actually use the ocean."

Hearne and others who literally pick up the pieces from naval activities in and above the ocean give that notion a rousing "huzzah."

Terry Dillman is the assistant editor of the News-Times. Contact him at (541) 265-8571, ext 225, or terrydillman@newportnewstimes.com.

Copyright © 2009 - Newport News-Times