NOAA may prohibit Navy sonar testing at marine mammal 'hot spots'

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Marine mammal "hot spots" in areas including Southern California's coastal waters may become off limits to testing of a type of Navy sonar linked to the deaths of whales under a plan announced this week by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

NOAA also called for development of a system for estimating the "comprehensive sound budget for the oceans," which could help reduce human sources of noise – vessel traffic, sonar and construction activities – that degrade the environment in which sound-sensitive species communicate.

The plans were revealed in a letter from NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco to the White House Council on Environmental Quality. In the letter, Lubchenco said her goal is to reduce adverse effects on marine mammals resulting from the Navy's training exercises.

Environmentalists contend that sonar has a possibly deafening effect on marine mammals. Studies around the world have shown the piercing underwater sounds cause whales to flee in panic or to dive too deeply. Whales have been found beached in Greece, the Canary Islands and the Bahamas after sonar was used in the area. Necropsies showed signs of bleeding in the ears.

Michael Jasny, senior policy analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said the plans were prompted by rules developed during the final days of the Bush administration that allow Navy sonar testing and training along the Atlantic Coast, the Gulf of Mexico, around Hawaii and the waters off Southern California through 2013.

"The Navy's Southern California range is over 120,000 nautical miles in size -- about the size of California itself," Jasny said. "The Bush administration did not put a square mile of this vast area off limits to sonar."

"The big question now," he added, "is whether the Obama administration has the will to actually bring about a proper balance between national security and environmental protection."

-- Louis Sahagun

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