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Navy to appear before Board on ocean testing

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The U.S. Navy will appear before the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors about its ocean weapons testing program on Tuesday at a special meeting of the Board, according to a release from the board issued Thursday.

Normally, the Board does not meet on fifth Tuesdays but will gather at 4 p.m. March 31 in board chambers for a presentation from U.S. Navy representatives on the controversial Northwest Training Range Complex and its environmental impacts.

The Navy's environmental study of its own testing program is up for public comment until April 13.

A map included in the study shows the southern boundary of active testing to be somewhere just south of Shelter Cove, which is the Humboldt-Mendocino county line. The testing area moves north through Oregon and Washington.

Many questions have been raised about the safety of weapons testing on ocean ecosystems, including how increased medium range sonar use might affect marine mammals and sealife. There will also be increased air and land testing by the Navy. Other branches of the service can also use the area. The inland area is comprised of most of the state of Washington.

There are several options in the documents available for public comment, including a no-action alternative and two options that feature increased

testing of new aircraft, missiles, underwater explosives and sonar.

While the military has been training in the area since before World War I, the environmental impact statement concludes that increased use of new weapons to the area could have impacts on birds, whales, fish and the ocean environment.

Unmanned aerial and ocean systems, new surface to air missiles, and a big increase in use of sonobuoys would all be part of the increased activity. The Navy would deploy 9,651 of the sonar emitting sonobuoys each year under their preferred plan.

Also to be tried out under the Navy's preferred alternative would be unmanned or "drone" aircraft, development of a training minefield fixed to the ocean bottom and development of a portable undersea tracking range.

U.S. Navy representatives John Mosher, Commander U.S. Pacific Fleet, Northwest Environmental Liaison and Project Manager; Kimberly Kler, Naval Facilities Engineering Command, Environmental Planner and Project Navy Technical Representative; and Brian Wauer, Project Operations Specialist, will be on hand to present information and respond to Board and public comment.

Supervisor David Colfax, 5th District, noted, "This is a rare opportunity for people to provide the Navy with information about our coast and our commitment to ensuring its continued wellbeing."

Congressman Mike Thompson (D-CA), added, "I'm pleased that the Navy will be conducting an in-person meeting so that everyone will have a chance to voice their concerns. We need to gather as much information and public input as possible so that we can fully evaluate the impact this will have on marine animals and the fishing community."

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The public is invited to attend the special Board meeting. Alternatively, meetings may be viewed via live web streaming from the Board's website at www.co.mendocino.ca.us/bos/cgibin/meetings.pl.

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