

Representative Mike Thompson

United States Congress

First District of California



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

May 28, 2009

Congressman Thompson Sends Letter to NOAA

Congressman Mike Thompson (D-CA) sent the following letter to NOAA Administrator Dr. Jane Lubchenco on May 21, 2009:

Dear Undersecretary Lubchenco:

As the Pacific Coast Congressman whose district includes more shoreline than any other in the contiguous United States, I am concerned about the United States Navy's ability to properly review the environmental impacts of proposed enhancements in its Northwest Training Range Complex (NWTRC). The Navy's environmental review process will remain insufficient until the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) completes its review of mitigation measures applicable to the use of sonar in the Pacific Northwest.

I am particularly concerned that NOAA's existing mitigation measures may not be best suited for the protected marine mammals and endangered salmonids present in the Pacific Northwest. While NOAA completed a review of measures to mitigate the negative impacts of sonar use in the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico earlier this year, many of the proposed mitigation actions revolve around species and habitats, such as the North Atlantic right whale, endemic to those regions. In order for NOAA to properly prescribe measures to mitigate the effects of sonar use in the NWTRC, it is essential that the ongoing review of mitigation measures includes a hard look at the cultural, economic and ecological consequences of NWTRC training for the Pacific Coast's invaluable ocean resources, including endangered Southern Oregon/Northern California Coastal coho salmon and the iconic gray whale.

I am also concerned about proposed changes to current levels of activity in the NWTRC that focus on training for new aircraft and ship classes and physical enhancements to the training range. The Navy's Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) acknowledges that these changes, particularly those related to its increased use of mid-frequency sonar, are likely to have measurable impacts on 32 protected marine mammal species known to inhabit the NWTRC. As the Navy moves forward with plans to train on new weapons systems, it is essential that NOAA identifies the environmental impacts of these new aircraft, ships and submarines – and their accompanying mitigation measures – specifically with reference to the productive ocean habitats and species that define the Pacific Coast.

Although I welcome NOAA's commitment to review sonar mitigation measures, I am not aware of any specific elements included in the evaluation and am concerned that the review

will be inadequate to address the Navy’s EIS with respect to protection of Pacific Coast ocean ecosystems. NOAA’s comprehensive review is particularly important given that the Navy has estimated shipboard visual monitoring for marine mammals – the most commonly employed sonar mitigation measure – to be effective only 9% of the time. It is important that NOAA take immediate steps to validate its comprehensive review of mitigation measures. Specifically, I request that you provide my office with an outline of the comprehensive review process and answers to the following questions:

1. What mitigation measures will be reviewed during NOAA’s process?
2. What data will NOAA use to identify those mitigation measures best able to protect marine species?
3. How will your agency’s recommendations target specific species, habitats or training activities of concern?
4. How will NOAA’s recommendations address sonar impacts to species other than marine mammals?
5. How will NOAA or the Navy establish performance standards to ensure that recommended mitigation measures are functioning as intended?

I look forward to working with you to ensure that any authorization of salmonid or marine mammal takes by the Navy is based on the best available science and includes those mitigation measures best able to protect marine species and habitats of the Pacific Northwest. I appreciate your attention to this important matter and your ongoing efforts to improve the health of our oceans.

Sincerely,

MIKE THOMPSON
Member of Congress
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