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“Groups boycotting Navy meetings”

**By FRANK HARTZELL Staff Writer Ft. Bragg Advocate-News
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With a dozen environmental groups boycotting Navy scoping hearings in the Pacific Northwest, some locals weren't sure it was prudent to come to Friday's Fort Bragg Town Hall event.

"That's why I didn't sign in," said George Reinhardt, who was one of several people curious about what was going on but who didn't want to lend their names to a process being called into doubt.

This was the only one of the nine "scoping sessions" held outside the area where proposed Navy air and sea testing and training will take place.

The Navy added Fort Bragg at the special request of Congressman Mike Thompson as the first step in preparing an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for testing and training activities off the Northern California, Oregon and Washington coast for the 2015-2020 timeframe. Like the last time the Navy came to town for hearings about the EIR in effect since 2010, the EIR does not involve activities off Mendocino County. The training range still starts at the southern extreme of Humboldt County and goes north to the Canadian border.

What's different this time is that both training and testing activities are to be allowed in the entire area, while only training was allowed off California under the last EIR (training did include use of live weapons). That means there could be live weapons testing and small scale war games off Northern California. Naval officials and EIR consultants at March 23 open house explained very little, if any, such activities would be scheduled off California. Most all the activities are foreseen to happen near the multiple Naval bases in Puget Sound.

Under the new EIR, the Navy won't test or train closer than 12 miles from shore in Oregon and Northern California, spokesmen said.

Navy spokesman John Mosher said ammunition made with depleted uranium is no longer used or carried in inventory on Navy ships. That was not true at the beginning of the process for the current EIR.

The Navy has used the waters off the Pacific Northwest for testing and training since 1914, but only in this century began legally submitting to a formal EIR process. As a cost-saving measure, the Navy will consolidate several EIRs for 2015 that were prepared separately for the 2010-2015 timeframe. Spokesmen said this will save both the Navy and federal environmental agencies time and money. Friday's event, which was much more like a Chamber of Commerce ribbon cutting than an information gathering public meeting, started with a film that explained the need for testing and training, then a dozen stations where people could stand up and talk one-on-one with consultants and a Navy officer arrayed around maps and graphical boards.

There was no opportunity for the public to speak to the Navy or hear an overview of what was going on. At a public comment station set up in the middle of the room, people struggled to figure what to comment about. Confused about the timeframes, what will be different and what public input might accomplish, a half dozen local people said they had told the Navy to simply not use sonar or live weapons in the ocean.

National and Pacific Northwest environmental groups were not impressed with the open house style setup or the cursory nature of information offered. The same setup was used at all nine scoping sessions.

"A process developed for activities with controversial impacts, like those at issue here, that does not provide opportunity for the public to testify or speak to a broader audience, or to hear answers to questions raised by others, and that fails to engage major population centers is not designed to help citizens and organization effectively participate in agencies' environmental reviews," wrote Zak Smith, staff attorney of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), on behalf of the 12, mostly national, organizations.

"Because this process fails to provide an opportunity for meaningful public participation, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act ("NEPA"), we have made a deliberate decision to not attend any of the Navy's scoping meetings or to encourage our members to do so," Smith wrote.

The visiting Navy contingent was 17 people. About 30 people stopped by during the three hours on Friday. Margaret Paul of Fort Bragg was also frustrated that no opportunity to speak was provided. "Why isn't a transcript of comments, questions and answers provided online after each scoping meeting for all to see? This process has no transparency and the interactive element is more like a dog-and-pony show with no real substance," Paul said.

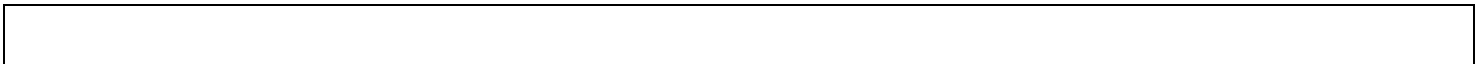
Paul and other locals wanted to know how the Navy would protect whales from sonar used by the Navy. Several asked Naval spokespersons about the death of an Orca killed by unusual injuries found washed up on the Washington Coast on Feb. 11. Liz Haapanen, of Fort Bragg, felt the answers given about the death of that whale were just too automatic.

"They said it couldn't have been us ... If they truly believe that, if they really don't see that they need to learn more, I am more worried than if I thought they were covering it up." The film and naval officials explained why active sonar in testing and training activities is essential. Most people skipped the seven-minute film, which was mostly public relations about the need to train to defend the USA. At one of the stations, a uniformed Navy officer explained Naval efforts to save fuel, use alternative fuels, increase recycling and reduce waste. Other stations also had little to do with the EIR. Does the United States truly fear submarine attacks by another nation?

Roy Sokolowski, a retired Naval sonar technician now working as a consultant for the EIR, said that isn't as implausible as it used to be. Back in the 1970s, when he was a young sailor, the Navy could hear other subs with passive sonar. Sokolowski said 40 nations now possess virtually silent diesel submarines that can't be heard simply by passive (listening) sonar. "Not all these nations are friendly," he said.

He conceded getting the technology and the sub is probably out of reach of terrorists, but said sailors need to know how to use active sonar detect subs, especially using foreign ports, where such an attack would be much more likely than along the shores of the U.S. The current EIR allows 108 annual hours of active mid-range sonar- the one that can have impacts on whales. Sokolowski said the new EIR figures to also authorize 108 hours of use of the mid-range sonar.

Other more common sonar, characterized by the Naval officials as being similar to a "fish finder" will also be used, including in new National Security exercises off Washington.



The impacts of sonar on whales and jumbo squid have been demonstrated but more science is needed. Worldwide naval use of active sonar has been matched with the standing deaths of 40 whales from 1996-2006, a Navy flier handed out Friday said. The same white paper said about 60 percent of the Navy's 140 ships and all of its 35 submarines are equipped with active sonar. Statistics and claims vary widely, as all admit more information is needed.

"By the Navy's own estimates, even 300 miles from the source, these sonic waves can retain an intensity of 140 decibels a hundred times more intense than the level known to alter the behavior of large whales," the NRDC website points out.

Although Navy spokesmen said the service will err on the side of caution in the EIR in terms of using the studies that find the higher impacts on whales, the NRDC and others point out the Navy has a history of denying problems.

"Evidence of the danger caused by these systems surfaced dramatically in 2000, when whales of four different species stranded themselves on beaches in the Bahamas. Although the Navy initially denied responsibility, the government's investigation established that mid-frequency sonar caused the strandings, the NRDC website points out. These issues were also litigated in Southern California sonar case in which NRDC and the Navy both claimed victory.

Sokolowski said the EIR won't allow for any large war games, only testing that might involve one ship against a stationary target or a sub in the same type situation. Locals got bits and pieces of what might be in the EIR from talking to the spokespeople, but the handouts had little specifics in what might be in the works. The three-volume, 2,000 page previous EIR from 2008 was available.

"The elephant in the room that wasn't discussed is the effect of active sonar explosions on whales and marine life, Paul said. "After three hours of Internet research, I learned that much research has and is currently being done on this topic demonstrating that sonar 'pings' or explosions cause whales to surface too rapidly causing bends-like symptoms, which can be fatal.

Whales are frequently blown-up by these explosions. They often abandon their feeding grounds to escape the sonar," Paul said.

The environmental groups said there needs to be an intelligible narrative and more opportunities for the public to speak and interact before the process should go forward. "We look forward to more substantive opportunities to participate in a manner that fulfills the purposes of NEPA," Smith wrote to the Navy.

Public comments must be postmarked no later than April 27, and should be mailed to: Ms. Kimberly Kler, Naval Facilities Engineering Command, Northwest, 1101 Tautog Circle, Suite 203, Silverdale, WA, 98315-1101, Attention: NWTT EIS/OEIS Project Manager.

Email any comments to www.nwtteis.com

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