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# Navy training along Pacific coast draws fire

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WASHINGTON – Could Ruffles and Granny be in trouble?

At 59, Ruffles is the oldest known male orca in the world, one of an estimated 150 orcas known to inhabit Puget Sound and the coast of Washington state. Granny is his 99-year-old mother.

Environmentalists fear for the safety of the whales as the U.S. Navy prepares to expand operations in its Northwest Training Range Complex, which stretches from the coast of Washington to Northern California.

"They're all very susceptible," said Howard Garrett, president of Orca Network, a nonprofit group based in Whidbey Island in Washington. "The Navy is single-minded. ... The whales are very much a secondary concern to them."

The group is among the many opponents in Washington state and California lining up against the plan.

At a public meeting hosted by Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, last week, Ali Freedlund told Navy officials that they were "jeopardizing everybody's fish by doing what you're doing."

Freedlund, of Arcata, said she fears the current training is already killing fish.

"They say that they're not affecting the salmon, but how would one know?" Freedlund asked. "They can't possibly know the effects."

The proposal, already approved by the Obama administration, calls for increased sailor training and weapons testing on the site. It also includes the development of an underwater training minefield for submarines.

The site, which has been in use since before World War II, consists of 122,400 nautical miles, roughly equal to the size of California.

Navy officials are trying to allay concerns over their activities, telling the public the marine life will be safe.

"We are not even permitted to kill even one marine mammal," said Sheila Murray, a Navy spokeswoman. "It's our environment, too. Of course, we want to take care of it. The Navy goes to great lengths to protect the marine environment."

Of the Navy's expanded operations at the site, she said: "This training is important. It allows naval forces to be prepared."

Opponents fear that missile and sonar testing and the dumping of depleted uranium could hurt the whales.

"It's just an assumption to me that there's going to be a lot of toxic material that's going to sink," said Garrett, who lives in Greenbank, Wash., on Whidbey Island. "And to what extent is that going to get into the food chain and into the diets of the whales?"

Garrett said the dispute is "an inherent values conflict" between conducting war exercises and protecting marine life.

"I'm not convinced by the assurances that the Navy gives that there will be no effect," he said. "I can't imagine that there won't be mortalities as there have been on many, many instances around the world."

Murray called that a myth.

"The Navy's been training on that range since before World War II – 70 years," she said. "Nobody was even aware that the Navy was there. And if what they were saying was true, they would see dead marine mammals floating up on shore. It's not true."

But there are plenty of skeptics.

Freedlund said that if more training is required, it should be done in less biologically active parts of the ocean.

"I don't feel that continuing to build up our military might is what we need to do when we're sacrificing so much of what we depend on in our environment," she said. "I mean, what are we defending anymore if we're not going to have a habitable planet to live on?"

In a letter to the Navy, the Natural Resources Defense Council said the plan "would pose significant risk to whales, fish and other wildlife."

The council said the plan would release a variety of hazardous materials into coastal waters, including "thousands of rounds of spent ammunition and unexploded ordnance containing chromium, chromium compounds, depleted uranium," and more.

At an earlier public hearing in Washington, Langley schoolteacher Kimmer Morris said she had a question for Navy officials: "How much depleted uranium do you want to eat in your fish and your children's fish and your grandchildren's fish? Do you have an amount that is acceptable to you?"

Garrett, who has photographed both Ruffles and Granny, said he's not only concerned about the orcas, but all of the whales in the training area.

He said the Orca Network will try to monitor how the whales fare, difficult as that might be.

"We don't have any inside track, and Navy operations are not broadcast," he said. "So we'll just have to hope there is some report if anything happens."

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