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The Navy isn't saying it will injure whales and dolphins as it trains sailors and tests equipment. It's telling the public and environmental regulators that its actions have the potential to harm or otherwise prompt a reaction in the animals.

The Navy takes a variety of measures to prevent harm to the animals, including turning off sonar when marine mammals are spotted nearby. It says the actual numbers of injured animals would be lower as a result.

The Navy must provide the information to the National Marine Fisheries Service to earn a permit for its activities. If it didn't do so and was later found to have harmed marine mammals, it would be found in violation of federal environmental law and have to stop its training and testing.

Zak Smith, staff attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council, said he's encouraged the Navy reduced the threshold for the level of sonar it found to affect beaked whales — a species that appears to be particularly sensitive to the noise.

The Navy said it changed the threshold because research has shown beaked whales move away and otherwise react when exposed to a lower level of sound than earlier studies indicated.

"My first glance shows there's positive steps," Smith said after he took a quick look at the 1,800-page document. But he said he would have to look at the details before giving his full assessment.

The Navy uses sonar to track enemy submarines, torpedoes, mines and other potential threats underwater. Sonar operators send pulses of sound through the ocean and then listen for echoes from objects hit by the sound waves.

Scientists say the sound may disrupt the feeding patterns of marine mammals. The sound may also startle some species of whales, causing them to surface rapidly.

The Navy will be holding public meetings on the study in Hawaii during the week of June 11 and in Southern California on June 20.

Online:

Hawaii and Southern California Training and Testing Study Area: www.hstteis.com

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