

Navy discusses sonar training, testing project with public

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An open house for a controversial U.S. Navy sonar training project drew a small crowd in its first hour Thursday evening in Eureka, with some residents cautioning of the project's impact on marine life.

Humboldt State University student Kayla Trotter agreed that the representatives didn't provide direct answers to her questions but still found the event somewhat informative.

"Everything seemed kind of vague," she said of the presentations.

Project Manager John Moiser said the Navy holds these events to inform the public but also to collect concerns. He said the Navy is open to comments, despite criticism from some environmental groups.

"We feel we're being as open and transparent with this process as possible," he said, adding that the public comment period is 60 days compared to the typical 30 days. The Navy is currently holding public meetings up and down the West Coast to gather input for a draft environmental impact statement, and expects to release the draft in fall 2013. The comment period closes on April 27.

The Navy's Northwest Training Range Complex is about 122,000 nautical square miles, stretching from the Olympic Peninsula in Washington to approximately the northern border of Mendocino County. The original project focused only on training and drew concern from local residents. The expanded project now includes the testing of various equipment and vessels. Navy representatives at the open house said sonar testing is important to new activities such as minesweeping as well as the detection of submarines. While most of the training and testing activities will be performed near Puget Sound off the coast of Washington, ships transiting down the coast to the San Diego training area can continue practicing procedures or testing equipment along the way.

While some groups have accused the Navy of only holding meetings far from metropolitan areas where more comments can be gathered, Moiser said the Navy wanted to hold hearings in coastal areas that were closest to the training area, where many of the comments from the previous project originated.

According to a biologist at the open house, the Navy has developed a sophisticated model to determine if sonar transmissions will affect mammals in the area based on known behavior patterns such as migration and eating habits. Results from the current training project were not immediately available at the event.

According to the Navy, ship-mounted mid-frequency sonar would be used for a maximum of 108 hours a year, and there are no plans to expand that amount. To mitigate the harm caused by sonar, the Navy established lookouts who watch for signs of whales. Several environmental groups have filed suit, saying that more measures are needed.

Eureka resident Chuck Goodwin said he came to the event because he wanted to learn more about the project and be a part of the process.

"I know it's a controversy in some areas. It isn't controversial to me. I support their service -- they need training. ... I'm glad to see a big federal government agency has to go through the environmental process like everyone else," he said.

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