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Navy Exercises Prepare Sailors with Minimal Impacts on Marine Life

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WASHINGTON (NNS) -- In an effort to train realistically in a wide variety of marine environments, the Navy recently proposed expanding training activities within several training ranges, including the Keyport Range Complex and the Gulf of Alaska Range.

"The Navy needs to train in areas that are similar to places where we may need to operate some day, and that can vary over time," said John Quinn, deputy director of the Chief of Naval Operations Energy and Environmental Readiness Division.

Models approved by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) predict the Navy's increased training plans have the potential to result in behavioral effects to marine mammals. No marine mammal mortalities are anticipated, and no long-term impacts on overall marine mammal populations are expected.

The models are "worst case;" they assume that no protective measures are implemented. With protective measures in place, the majority of these effects are not expected to occur.

Before approving the Navy's requests for permits, NMFS conducts an analysis of the plans to ensure that the proposed activities and recommended mitigation measures will have negligible impacts on marine mammals. NMFS has granted all of the Navy's previous permit applications for ranges spanning much of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

"We have protective measures in place for all of our training areas, particularly with respect to sonar," said Quinn.

The Navy employs protective measures on all ranges, and training and testing areas, to minimize the potential for affecting marine species.

NMFS authorizations require area-specific mitigation measures to ensure the least practicable impact on the marine environment. Examples include marine species awareness training for shipboard lookouts, using all available sensor and optical systems (such as night vision goggles) to aid in marine mammal detection prior to sonar use, and ceasing sonar transmissions if marine mammals are sighted within close proximity to ships using sonar.

To ensure compliance regarding exposures of marine mammals to manmade sound and other environmental effects, the Navy works with NMFS through the Marine Mammal Protection Act permitting process and with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for section 7 consultations under the Endangered Species Act.

"The Navy shares the public's concern about protecting marine species, and believes collaborative efforts with regulatory agencies, academia and non-governmental organizations have helped improve conservation efforts," said Quinn. "The Navy has also invested millions of dollars in research and made substantial strides in strengthening procedures and equipment for environmental protection while operating at sea."

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