

U.S. Navy Plans to Expand its Submarine Testing Range to Include The Entire Pacific Northwest Coast

Local News

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GREENBANK, Wash. - Underwater is usually a quiet place, but when the U.S. Navy is doing submarine security exercises, the calm can be shattered by blasts of high-intensity sonar. Marine experts say sonar affects dolphins and whales, along with other sea life - and can stun and even kill them. Whale-watchers along the Pacific Northwest coast monitor the sonar as well as whales' behavior.

Howard Garrett, co-founder of the Orca Network, says major incidents are rare, but in the Northwest, there is concern about the Navy's plans to expand the training areas.

"The proposed expansion of these exercise areas actually goes all the way down the coast to northern California, so it includes all of Oregon and Washington coastline, out in some places, 300 miles."

The public comment period for the proposed expansion of sonar testing is underway. Garrett says the Navy has been open to dialogue, although not much has changed since his group and others have challenged the use of sonar.

"They have a very limited repertoire of responses. It amounts to pretty much stationing sailors onboard with binoculars to look around to see if there are any whales that are obvious, and a few flyovers before they do these exercises."

The Navy says sonar is the best way to detect quiet, diesel-powered enemy submarines. Garrett hopes the discussion will expand, to include the reasons for its use in the first place.

"Their trump card is national defense. To look at an actual solution to that, you need to go beyond the issue of sonars and exercises - and look at international relations, and diplomacy."

The National Marine Fisheries Service allows some whale and dolphin deaths as part of sonar testing and training. The investigative website www.DCBureau.org reports that the Navy spends millions of dollars a year on marine mammal research, and most of its studies say sonar has minimal effects on whales. Studies funded by other sources disagree.