



Contact: Connie Barclay
301-713-2370

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NOAA Seeks Comments on Measures to Protect Marine Mammals as Navy Conducts Sonar Operations off Hawaiian Islands

NOAA's Fisheries Service is seeking comments now through July 23 on its proposed authorization for Navy training exercises around the main Hawaiian Islands. The NOAA proposal includes protective measures designed to minimize impacts on marine mammals.

The Navy has requested an authorization under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, because the mid-frequency sound generated by tactical sonar, and the sound and pressure generated by detonating explosives, may affect the behavior of some marine mammals or cause a temporary loss of their hearing sensitivity.

NOAA's Fisheries Service does not expect the exercises to result in serious injury or death to marine mammals, and is proposing the Navy use mitigation measures to avoid injury or death. However, exposure to sonar in certain circumstances has been associated with the stranding of some marine mammals, and some injury or death may occur despite the best efforts of the Navy. The draft authorization allows for incidental impacts on marine mammals, including injury or death of up to 10 animals of each of 10 species over the five years covered by the authorization.

NOAA's Fisheries Service has determined that these effects would have a negligible effect on the species or stocks involved.

Under the authorization, the Navy would have to follow mitigation measures to minimize effects on marine mammals, including:

- establishing marine mammal safety zones around each vessel using sonar
- the use of Navy observers to shut down sonar operations if marine mammals are seen within designated safety zones;
- the use of exclusion zones to ensure that explosives are not detonated when animals are detected within a certain distance;
- a stranding response plan that includes a training shutdown provision in certain circumstances and a memorandum of agreement to allow the Navy to contribute in-kind services to NOAA's Fisheries Service if the agency has to conduct a stranding response and investigation;
- establishing an area of extra caution in the Maui Basin because of its high density of humpback whales.

These measures should minimize the potential for injury or death and significantly reduce the number of marine mammals exposed to levels of sound likely to cause temporary loss of hearing.

NOAA's Fisheries Service and the Navy have worked to develop a robust monitoring plan to use independent, experienced aerial and vessel-based marine mammal observers (as well as Navy watch standers), passive acoustic monitoring, and tagging to help better understand how marine mammals respond to various levels of sound and to assess the effectiveness of mitigation measures.

The Navy has been conducting training exercises, including the use of mid-frequency sonar, in the Hawaiian Islands for more than 40 years. Exercises range from large multi-national, month-long training exercises using multiple submarines, ships, and aircraft conducted every other year, known as Rim of Pacific Training Exercises, to two- to three-day exercises to test the readiness of battle groups, known as Undersea Warfare Exercises or USWEXs, and shorter exercises that last less than a day. In addition, some exercises involve the use of explosives.

NOAA's Fisheries Service will accept comments on the application and proposed authorization through July 23. Comments should be addressed to:

Michael Payne, Chief of the Permits, Conservation, and Education Division
Office of Protected Resources, NMFS
1315 East West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Electronic public comments may be submitted via the Federal eRulemaking Portal <http://www.regulations.gov> using the identifier: 0648-AW86.

NOAA's Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitats through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 70 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

On the Web:

NOAA's Fisheries Service: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>