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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
Oct. 14, 2008

**NOAA Seeks Comments on Measures to Protect Marine Mammals**

*Navy Plans to Conduct Sonar Operations off the Atlantic Coast and Gulf of Mexico*

NOAA's Fisheries Service is seeking comments through Nov. 13 on its proposed authorization for the Navy's Atlantic Fleet Active Sonar Training (AFAST) to take place along the Atlantic Coast and in the Gulf of Mexico. The NOAA proposal includes protective measures designed to minimize the effects of the training on marine mammals.

The Navy has requested an authorization under the Marine Mammal Protection Act because the mid-frequency sound generated by tactical sonar 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, but is proposing the Navy use mitigation measures to avoid such results. The draft authorization allows for incidental impacts on marine mammals, including injury or death of up to 10 beaked whales over the five years covered by the authorization.

The agency has announced a similar comment period for Navy sonar training off the southern California coast. Both proposed authorizations cover the use of sonar in training exercises in certain areas from 2009 to 2014. The proposed authorizations are not part of the recent Supreme Court litigation, which addresses Navy sonar use under a 2007 two-year National Defense Exemption.

NOAA's Fisheries Service has determined that these effects would have a negligible overall 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, and using Navy observers to shut down sonar operations if marine mammals are seen within these designated safety zones;
- implementing a stranding response plan that includes a training shutdown provision in certain circumstances (with special circumstances for North Atlantic right whales) 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;
- minimizing helicopter dipping sonar and object detection exercises in the North Atlantic right whale critical habitat in the southeast Atlantic Ocean from December through March;
- using several cautionary measures to minimize impacts from torpedo exercises conducted in the North Atlantic right whale critical habitat in the northeast Atlantic Ocean;

- using designated Planning Awareness Areas to raise awareness of Navy personnel and lessen impacts in designated productive marine mammal habitat;
- using several cautionary measures to minimize the likelihood of ship strikes of North Atlantic right 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) and passive acoustic monitoring 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 Atlantic Ocean for more than 40 years. Exercises range from large, three week-long strike group training exercises using multiple submarines, ships and aircraft to two- to three-day unit level training, consisting of several multi-hour exercises designed to target specific skills or weapons systems, such as object detection or helicopter dipping sonar.

NOAA's Fisheries Service will accept comments on the application and proposed authorization through Nov. 13. Comments should be addressed to:

Michael Payne,  
Chief; 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-AW90.

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.

NOAA understands and predicts changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and conserves and manages our coastal and marine resources. Visit <http://www.noaa.gov>.