

Michael Stocker Comments
California Coastal Commission
December 15, 2006 Meeting

Re: Agenda Item F 8c
Staff Recommendations on Consistency Determination CD 086-06
US Navy Onshore and offshore Pacific Fleet military training exercises.

Dear Commissioners,

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the Staff Recommendations on the US Navy request for a consistency determination for operations on and off the southern coast of our state. We have not seen the actual consistency determination in question so these comments will be directed to issues we do see, and perhaps more importantly, what do not see addressed in the Staff Recommendations.

By-and-large we would concur with the staff that as the areas in question have been used for Naval and other military exercises over the past 70 years, it is possible that many of the exercises would not represent new assaults on the environment. We would also agree that operational changes over the last 70 years have tended toward a more responsible environmental stewardship and ocean resource management.

This is represented by the details quoted in the recommendation about mitigation measures around the use of explosives (p.11 – 13). As the Navy has had years of experience with the use of explosives in the subject areas, we can surmise that their assessments of the risks of biological damage from the use of explosives are accurate.

But our concerns arise out of what is not explored in the staff recommendations – specifically regarding the proposed use of mid-frequency sonar. While there is some debate on how mid frequency sonar inflicts damage on marine mammals, there is no debate that mid frequency sonar does negatively impact them.

Your staff indicates that the deployment of mid-frequency sonar is not a concern because the deployment would “only occur outside the coastal zone.” While the deployment would be outside of an area of the Commission’s jurisdiction, the effects of marine mammal strandings as a consequence of the impacts of these exercises could easily – and would likely occur on the coast, as marine mammals often strand on beaches many miles away from the damaging sonar exercises. While the Navy has denied their roles in the recent rough tooth dolphin strandings in the Florida Keys¹ and the Multi-species stranding in the North Carolina,² both of these strandings occurred within the area and time period of US Navy sonar exercises. The Navy’s denial of culpability is based on “absence of any evidence” suggesting that the exercises were at fault. In these cases, as in the increasing litany of others, the cumulative “coincidences” of these tragedies points to

¹ March 2, 2005 “Sonar Suspect in Dolphin Wash- up” CBS News

² 2005 Multi-species Mass Stranding in North Carolina. NOAA Office of Protected Resources report.

more than “just another anecdotal event.” In these cases – as in the many other cases where the Navy has denied culpability, we believe that the absence of evidence does not constitute an absence of cause.

The mid-frequency sonars increasingly deployed by the Navy comprise a new set of technologies, having been deployed only in the last few years – concurrent to the dramatic rise in marine mammal strandings coincident with naval exercises.

These new sonars are not the doleful ranging and navigation sonars of the past; rather they include very loud digital communication sonars with very fast rise times and high crest factors. These are sounds unlike any natural sounds in the ocean, and while we have more to learn about the impacts of these new signals, damage can occur at exposure levels which are significantly lower than the “acceptable exposure levels” proposed by the Navy. For example, the acceptable exposure level for explosives quoted in the Staff Recommendation document is 173 dB re:1uPa²s, but in the Bahamas beaked whale stranding incident it was determined that the mid-frequency sonar exposure levels responsible for the stranding was no more than 165 dB re:1uPa²s. This would clearly indicate that there is more to exposure impacts than just energy levels.

We are respectfully asking that the Commission deny the current consistency determination and ask their Staff to review the impacts of mid-frequency sonar in greater detail with respect to the concerns we have expressed herein.

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