

Navy exercises threaten Southern California coast

In October of this year, for the first time ever, the U.S. Navy filed a Consistency Determination with the California Coastal Commission regarding their bi-annual “U.S. Pacific Fleet military training exercises.” Conducted to train Navy and Marine forces in “coordinated deployment and preparedness exercises,” similar exercises have been taking place on the coast and in the waters of Southern California since the 1920’s. Under the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, all federal agencies are required to file a “Consistency Determination” to certify that any of their activities affecting the coastal zone are consistent with state policies.

This is the first time that the Navy has submitted a Consistency Determination for an exercise that they have conducted for the past 70 years – an indication that Navy policies are beginning to take environmental stewardship into consideration. Because these exercises have had such a long history, we would expect that the Navy’s assessment of environmental risk would be informed and accurate – except for one other “first” in this Determination: This is the first time that the Navy has proposed using “mid-frequency active” sonar off the coast of California.

Mid-frequency active sonars increasingly deployed by the Navy comprise a new set of technologies. These technologies have been deployed only in the past few years – concurrent with the dramatic rise in marine mammal strandings coincident with naval exercises. The beaked whale strandings in the Bahamas and the Canary Islands, the Orcas incident in the Haro Strait, and the Hanalei Bay melon headed whale incident – just to name a few – have all been associated or directly tied to the use of mid-frequency active sonar.

The Navy maintains that the mid-frequency sonars will only be deployed off of San Clemente Island – outside of the Coastal Commission’s jurisdiction. But any animals maimed or killed by these sonars are likely to end up on the beaches of Southern California – well within the Commission’s management zone.

And what can we expect from the Navy? The recent Navy report on the Hanalei Bay incident attempts to distance the concurrent international naval “RIMPAC” exercises from culpability, implicating the “full moon” or “boaters and surfers” as other possible causes.¹ While the recent rough-tooth dolphin strandings in the Florida Keys² and the multi-species stranding in North Carolina³ both occurred within the area and time period of U.S. Navy sonar exercises, the Navy has denied its role in them.

These strandings are a tragedy in-and-of themselves. However the tragic international attention and the huge management and clean-up costs that these incidents incur point to a need for increased vigilance around the Navy’s use of these technologies. We understand the need to prepare our forces with the best available technology and training, but at what cost?

There was a time not long after the “successful” use of the atomic bomb that the Army considered issuing small tactical nuclear weapons to foot soldiers. If a weapon could decisively end a confrontation, this was surely it. Fortunately calmer minds prevailed, and the planet was saved for other torments.

Mid-frequency sonar may represent the “best available technology” for its task, but given its deadly impact on marine animals, alternative technologies must be developed. We encourage calmer minds to step forward and halt the use of this sinister technology.

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The first California Coastal Commission (CCC) hearing and public comment opportunity for this Consistency Determination (CD-086-06) occurred in San Francisco on December 15, 2006. The Navy was asked to provide additional information and adhere to certain guidelines if they were to get approval from the CCC. The next and final CCC hearing on this issue will take place January 11 – 13, 2007 at the Hyatt Regency Long Beach, 200 S. Pine Avenue, Long Beach, CA 90802.

¹ “Analysis of melon-headed whale aggregation in Hanalei Bay, July 2004” David M. Fromm. Presentations at the 4th Joint meeting of the Acoustical Society of America and the Acoustical Society of Japan. November 28 – December 2, 2006.

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

³ “2005 Multi-species Mass Stranding in North Carolina.” NOAA Office of Protected Resources report.