

Concerns Linger Over Naval War Games

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The USS John C. Stennis aircraft carrier steams through the Gulf of Alaska during a past Northern Edge exercise in Alaska waters. This year's planned use of sonar in the Gulf of Alaska remains controversial. U.S. Navy Mate 3rd Class Mark J. Rebilas
file photo

Jacob Resneck/KMXT

This summer the military plans to resume its Northern Edge exercises that include bombing ranges in the Gulf of Alaska. This year's plan by the U.S. Navy to test medium-frequency sonar for antisubmarine warfare practice has raised concerns about the impact

to marine mammals and fisheries.

. KMXT's Jacob Resneck reports.

-- navy sonar pkg 7:43 "This summer's 14-day ... I'm Jacob Resneck."

This summer's 14-day exercise will again bring together different branches of the armed forces for a unique training opportunity in the North Pacific, says Air Force Major Mike Cabral.

-- cabral 1

Also planned are Naval exercises in a 42,000-square-nautical mile area extending east of Kodiak Island to just south of Seward. Over the next five years, the Navy wants to test its medium-frequency sonar during two 21-day operations between April and October. Its preferred plan would also include using a mothballed ship as target practice.

The Navy's use of sonar near marine mammals has its critics. And past court battles have pitted the Navy against the Natural Resources Defense Council over potential harm to marine mammals, says NRDC staff attorney Taryn Kiekow.

-- kiekow6

But legal

action would be premature as the Navy still has to sign off on its environmental impact statement. That's not for another two weeks. Meanwhile the Navy has applied to the National Marine Fisheries Service for a permit required under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

-- harrison 5

That's Jolie Harrison, a supervisory biologist with the NIMFS' Office of Protected Resources. She says the Navy monitoring plan will likely minimize harm.

But NRDC wants the Navy to go further and close off areas identified as sensitive habitat.

-- kiekow5

Instead, the Navy plans to use employ monitors to look out for wildlife, says Alex Stone, a senior civilian planner with the U.S. Navy's Pacific Command in San Diego.

-- stone5

In its proposed rule filed in the federal register, the National Marine Fisheries Service would allow the Navy to cause the deaths of up to 15 beaked whales over a five-year period.

That's because there have been documented cases of beached whales to become disoriented, beached and killed from exposure to sonar. Still, Harrison says it's unlikely to happen in Alaska.

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Also permitted are about 425,000 takes per year. "Take" is a legal term that constitutes disruptions of behavior that run from minor things like causing a seal to swim the other way to heavy disruptions in feeding, nursing and migration patterns of marine mammals. But Stone says the Navy doesn't believe there will be long-term effects.

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While the Navy is on track to receive its permit from the National Marine Fisheries Service, others remain unconvinced.

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That's Kodiak commercial fisherman Dave Kubiak. He's president of the Alaska Marine Conservation Council, an advocacy group for coastal communities.

-- kubiak2

Native tribes have also weighed in. Rick Rowland, natural resources director for the Sun'aq Tribe of Kodiak Island, says the tribe is one of several whose traditional feeding grounds come from the Gulf of Alaska.

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But Stone says the impact on fisheries would be minimal.

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In its

advisory role the National Marine Fisheries Service had asked the Navy to not sink any ships in specialized habitat areas, do long-term monitoring and work with federal biologists to develop a long-term fish mortality plan. But the Navy declined on most counts, calling these proposals infeasible. In a written response, it said it doubted the mortality plan would yield useful data.

Harrison

says that outside the provisions of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, there's little her agency can do to compel the Navy to change its course.

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The comment

period on the Navy's environmental study closes April 11. After that the Navy is free to issue its decision of the scope and length of its military exercises this summer in the Gulf of Alaska.

In Kodiak,

I'm Jacob Resneck###