

A-015



North Carolina  
Coastal Federation

March 28, 2008

Naval Facilities Engineering Command, Atlantic Division  
Attn: Code EV22 (Atlantic Fleet Sonar PM)  
6506 Hampton Blvd.  
Norfolk, VA 23508-1278  
Fax: 888 875 6781

Re Comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Atlantic Fleet Active Sonar Training

To the AFAST Project Manager:

807 [ The North Carolina Coastal Federation (NCCF) submits these comments on the Navy's Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for its Atlantic Fleet Active Sonar Training program (AFAST). NCCF attended the scoping meeting for this program in 2007 and attended the public hearing held in Morehead City on March 11, 2008. We also gave public comment for the Navy's Undersea Warfare Training Range (USWTR) Draft Environmental Impact Statement, which identified coastal North Carolina as the preferred site. Further, we organized a public forum on the state of scientific knowledge about the impacts of sonar activities, tapping into the wealth of scientist expertise in N.C. The event was well-attended, though the Navy chose not to participate, and provided strong evidence that the public is concerned about the adverse impacts that naval sonar use can have on marine life and the coastal economic engines of fishing and boating. ]

808 [ NCCF has serious concerns about the AFAST DEIS as it, like the earlier DEIS for the USWTR, is inadequate in several respects.

First, there are currently three Navy environmental assessments going on for sonar and explosives use (among other activities) in the same geographic region off the North Carolina coast: the USWTR, the AFAST and the assessment of the Cherry Point Operations Area or OPAREA. Treating these activities as if they were isolated provides an incorrect picture of Navy activities in the region. They all will take place in the same area, and as such, the Navy must address their total cumulative impacts on marine life, the ocean environment and the affected local communities, as is required in an environmental impact statement that fulfills the intent of the National Environmental Policy Act. ]

809 [ Next, the division of the three EIS processes needlessly confuses the public, which has indicated a strong concern about the Navy's sonar activities and their effects. The public hearing on the USWTR had an attendance of nearly 200 people who took time from their families and

A-015

work to attend the meeting and the public comment process generated hundreds of comments, demonstrating the attention paid to this important issue. Many people believe that their comments for the USWTR count for the AFAST process as well, since the same concerns apply and thus did not attend the public meeting. The Navy should incorporate the all of the public comments from the USWTR process into the AFAST DEIS and those performing the revised analysis for the AFAST EIS should incorporate all of those suggestions into their assessment. ]

810 [ Third, the Navy once again makes the baseless claim in its environmental assessment in Chapter 4 that little or no information on impacts to various species equals little or no impacts to them. This is untrue, and when dealing with a matter of this much importance environmentally and economically, the Navy should take the precautionary principle as its guidance. The precautionary principle states that if an action or policy might cause severe or irreversible harm, in the absence of a scientific consensus that harm would not ensue, the burden of proof falls on those who would advocate taking the action. While not precluding action from being taken, strong precautionary measures should be taken even if all cause and effect relationships are not established. The Navy's sonar activities fall into the category of such an action. ]

811 [ There is strong and growing evidence linking sonar use to marine mammal strandings and death. Faced with this increasing body of knowledge and the harm sonar as its currently used is causing marine mammals, including the critically injured right whale, the Navy's preferred no action alternative of 'business as usual' approach is the wrong one. The Navy acknowledges that continuing its current course of action is the most environmentally damaging one; this should not be allowed to continue. ]

813 [ Inadequate attention is paid to the deleterious effects naval activities could have on marine life. And in last years' exemption of the Navy from the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Navy signaled its lack of attention to mitigating the environmental damage of its actions. This DEIS continues in this direction, by:

- Failing to incorporate scientific advice about the decibel level at which negative effects of sonar can appear. ]
- 815 • [ Failing to take robust mitigation measures recommended by scientists, such as NMFS-trained observers, passive sonar scanning of the area prior to exercise and notification of the public and the scientific community so the effects of the sonar use could be studied and tracked. ]
- 816 • [ Lack of information being established about the effects of sonar on finfish who use sound for foraging, communication and navigation. This is a significant oversight of both environmental and economic impacts, given the importance of the commercial and recreational fisheries in North Carolina. ]
- 817 • [ Lack of addressing the effects sonar and the gear associated with naval exercises can have on sea turtles, which use N.C. beaches as nesting grounds and regularly pass the N.C. coast. ]

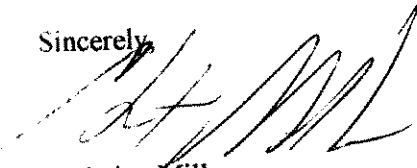
818 [ To begin to address these failings, the Navy must conduct further studies of these effects, give the scientific community information it needs to investigate environmental effects of sonar and explosives use, and take advantage of the wealth of scientific expertise available in North Carolina through the academic community and watermen by soliciting their views and then taking the steps they recommend. ]

A-015

822 [ Finally, the large amount of waste that the Navy discards during its operations presents another significant problem unaddressed by this DEIS. The sonobuoys, torpedos and other equipment, including batteries and line, and the chemicals attendant in naval operations all pose hazards to marine mammals, sea turtles and other species. They also pose serious danger to fishing and recreational vessels. Captain Joe Shute has circulated pictures of two large metal containers he pulled from the sea before they were able to damage his ship, and gave testimony that if they were to hit a vessel it would likely be severely damaged or even sunk. The Navy must look at options for retrieving its detritus. ]

824 [ The U.S. military is charged with providing environmental stewardship of our public trust resources as it trains. It must fully assess the cumulative effects of its actions on the environment and communities it affects, take into account the precautionary principle and experience of the scientific and local communities, clean up after itself and make sure it does as little harm as is possible. This DEIS fails to do that. Please remedy this in the next version of this document. ]

Sincerely,



Christine Miller  
North Carolina Coastal Federation