



# NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC AND  
ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE



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## **NOAA Gives Navy Marine Mammal Protection Measures for Sonar Training off the Atlantic Coast and Gulf of Mexico**

NOAA's Fisheries Service has issued regulations and a letter of authorization to the U.S. Navy that includes measures to protect marine mammals while conducting Atlantic fleet active sonar training off the Atlantic coast and in the Gulf of Mexico. The regulations require the Navy to implement measures designed to protect and minimize effects to marine mammals.

Along with issuing these regulations, NOAA will undertake a comprehensive review of all mitigation measures applicable to the use of sonar and will report to the Council on Environmental Quality regarding the results of this review within 120 days.

These regulations, in effect for five years, govern the incidental take of marine mammals during the Navy's training activities, include required mitigation and monitoring measures, and require annual letters of authorization. The letters of authorization, which are required for the Navy to legally conduct their activities, provide the Navy with the terms and conditions of the marine mammal mitigation measures, and requires annual reports, and Navy review of their activities to show they do not result in more numerous effects or more severe harm to marine mammals than were originally analyzed or authorized.

The Navy requested authorization under the Marine Mammal Protection Act because the mid-frequency sound generated by tactical active sonar may affect the behavior of some marine mammals or cause a temporary loss of their hearing.

NOAA's Fisheries Service does not expect the exercises to result in serious injury or death to marine mammals and is requiring the Navy to use mitigation measures intended to avoid injury or death. However, in a small number of cases, exposure to sonar in certain circumstances has been associated with the stranding of some marine mammals, and some injury or death potentially could occur despite the best efforts of the Navy. Therefore, the regulations and the letter allow for a small number of incidental injuries to marine mammals.

NOAA's Fisheries Service has determined that these effects would have a negligible impact on the species or stocks involved.

Under the regulations and the letter, the Navy must 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 worked to develop a robust monitoring plan to use independent, trained and 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 implementation of this monitoring plan is included as a requirement of the regulations and the letter.

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.

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NOAA's Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat 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. To learn more about NOAA's Fisheries Service, visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>.

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