



DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
2000 NAVY PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20350-2000

IN REPLY REFER TO

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Ser N456/6U838162

26 JUL 06

The Honorable John Warner
United States Senate
225 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-4601

Dear Senator Warner:

Thank you for your letter of June 1, 2006 regarding concerns expressed by your constituent, Ms. Valerie Kelly, about US Navy activities at the Atlantic Undersea Test and Evaluation Center (AUTEK) and the possible relationship to strandings of three whales on separate occasions between January and April of this year. I am responding on behalf of the US Navy.

Located on Andros Island, Bahamas AUTEK has provided the US and allied navies with an essential and unique testing and evaluation capability since the late 1960's. While specific activities may have changed over the years, the general sound characteristics of these activities has not changed in a significant manner. However, changes in strategic requirements have led to an overall reduction in the number of activities that are conducted in the area.

Since January 2006, three whales have been found stranded on the shores of Andros Island, Bahamas. In accordance with Navy policy, we analyzed the activities that had taken place in the area prior to the discovery of these animals to ascertain whether or not Navy activities could have been a contributing factor in these strandings. This analysis is contained in Attachment (1). Without necropsy results, it is impossible to determine the cause of death of these animals. However, based on the information we have available, we have determined that it is unlikely that a Navy activity associated with AUTEK contributed to the deaths of any of the three animals.

The Navy recognizes its activities may have an effect on the marine environment, in particular, marine mammals. As such, the Navy analyzed the potential effects of activities conducted at AUTEK, and documented that analysis through an Environmental Review document (ER), in 1997. Among other things, this document establishes standard mitigation measures to be employed for different types of activities. Each proposed range test is

reviewed by environmental professionals to determine if the test falls within the scope of the AUTEK ER, and to determine the type and scope of mitigation required for that test, if any. Examples of these mitigation measures include: ensuring that trained marine mammal observers are on board all range vessels, and other vessels involved in the test, employing "ramp-up" procedures (sonar emitted at lower and increasing output power) prior to testing at the full operational level, and utilizing passive acoustic devices to identify the presence of vocalizing mammals.

The state of knowledge on the effects of sound on the underwater environment is constantly becoming more advanced. As the Navy and other entities gain more scientific information, we will incorporate that information into our environmental analyses. Navy is currently reviewing the science and knowledge to determine whether an update is warranted. Should an update be necessary, we will work closely with the Bahamian Government and the US State Department to ensure that local concerns are appropriately addressed.

To that end, the Navy has recently conducted a series of open house discussions with Bahamian government officials. One visit included the Minister of Agriculture and Marine Resources (Honorable Leslie Miller), the Minister of Health and National Insurance (Honorable Dr. Glen Benaby), the Minister of Energy and the Environment (Honorable Dr. Marcus Bethel), the Head of the Bahamas Environment Science and Technology Commission (Dr. Donald Cooper) and the head of the Bahamian Department of Fisheries (Mr. Michael Braynen). Following this ministerial visit, the Navy conducted an additional open house in which the media was invited to attend. Several outlets participated, including the Nassau Guardian, the Tribune, and the local television station. Others, including the Bahama Journal chose not to participate.

Through these open house discussions, the Navy presented the types of activities that occur on the facility and discussed some of the innovative research that is being conducted at the facility to develop new technology to help detect, localize and track whales. In addition, the Navy listened to the concerns of the Bahamian government and local communities. The Navy looks forward to continuing this essential dialog.

Attachment 1: Navy activity on AUTEK Range and Three Separate whale stranding Events on Andros Island, Bahamas.

The Navy reviewed its activities 72 hours prior to the discovery of each of these animals to determine if any correlation could be ascertained. If a spatial or temporal correlation between the activity and the stranding was determined, we then examined the type of activity for factors that have been determined in the past to be a contributing factor to other strandings in the region. Based on this analysis, the Navy has determined that it is unlikely that Navy activity associated with AUTEK contributed to the deaths of these three animals.

As your constituent noted, a stranding network equivalent to the stranding network administered by the National Marine Fisheries Service in the United States does not exist in the Bahamas. As such, there is no formal response to strandings. As a consequence, necropsies were not performed on the two beaked whales. Tissue samples were collected from the sperm whale, however experts in the US have not had the opportunity to review these tissue samples due to import/export permit complications.

Species: Sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*)

Location: Cargill Creek, Andros Island

Analysis: On February 24, 2006 AUTEK personnel spotted a deceased sperm whale adrift and being attacked by sharks on the weapons range. Bahamian officials were notified that same day. The whale was spotted stranded on February 27, 2006. Combat Systems Ship Qualification Trials were conducted on the North Weapons Range from February 21-22, 2006, for a total of 25 hours of testing.

Species: Gervais' Beaked whale (*Mesoplodon europaeus*)

Location: Big Wood Cay, Andros Island

Analysis: On April 7, 2006 a Gervais' beaked whale was found in an advanced state of decomposition near Big Wood Cay, Andros Island. Navy's investigation indicates that there was no Navy activity on the delineated weapons range testing area within 72 hours of discovery of this animal.

Species: Beaked whale (species is unknown)

Location: Big Wood Cay, Andros Island

Analysis: On April 14, 2006 an unknown species of beaked whale was discovered in an advanced stage of decomposition. Two testing events occurred on the North Weapons Range from April 10-14, 2006. The first was an SH-60 helicopter squadron utilizing a dipping sonar for a total of 10 hours between April 10-11, 2006. The second was a Weapons System Accuracy Trial (WSAT) involving a United Kingdom Submarine for a total of 38.5 hours of testing (both active and passive). The WSAT was testing a UK system analogous to a Multi-purpose Acoustic Target Source. Specific locations within the delineated North Weapons Range could not be ascertained for all of these tests.

In 2000, a stranding of beaked whales occurred in the Northeast and Northwest Providence Channels of the Bahamas Islands has been associated with Navy activity. A joint, comprehensive investigation was conducted by the Navy and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NFMS) into the possible causes of the stranding. A report, issued in December 2001 concluded that a confluence of factors contributed to this stranding incident. These factors include the presence of a strong surface duct, unusual underwater bathymetry, intensive active use of multiple sonar units over an extended period of time, a constricted channel with limited egress, and the presence of beaked whales.

The Navy reviewed the identified activities to determine if any of these factors were present. None of the identified factors were present in the period prior to the discovery of these three strandings, in particular the presence of multiple sonar units. Therefore, the Navy is of the opinion that our activities were not a contributing factor to these three strandings.

Further, the intermittent nature of the sonar testing and, in the case of the British system, the relatively low power output of the active sonar significantly differentiates these activities from those that were conducted prior to the 2000 stranding incident.

As always, thank you for your interest in this matter. If you require further assistance, please contact Ms. Elizabeth Phelps at elizabeth.phelps@navy.mil or 703-604-5467.

Sincerely,



J. A. SYMONDS
Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy
Director, Environmental Readiness
Division

Attachment 1:

Navy activity on AUTEK Range and Three Separate whale stranding Events on Andros Island, Bahamas.

CC:

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