

Basnight condemns proposed Navy sonar field

Dec 21, 2005 : 6:51 pm ET RALEIGH, N.C. -- A sonar training range the Navy wants to build off the North Carolina coast "will have a disastrous impact on North Carolina," state Senate Leader Marc Basnight wrote Wednesday in a letter to the state's congressional delegation. Also Wednesday, the Navy -- faced with numerous requests for an extension -- agreed to push back the deadline for public comments on a draft report that predicts little environmental impact from the range.

The plan has drawn opposition from North Carolina officials and environmental groups. Members of the Joint Legislative Commission on Seafood and Aquaculture complained that a briefing Monday by Navy representatives didn't clear up their concerns. The proposed 660-square-mile range, 47 miles off shore from Camp Lejeune, would be used for training ships and aircraft in the use of sonar, a technology that detects objects under the sea by bouncing sound off them. Opponents fear the impact of the sound waves on marine life, saying they sometimes kill whales and dolphins. Environmentalists sued the Navy in October, claiming the stranding and deaths of at least 37 whales last January near the Oregon Inlet of the Outer Banks occurred after a mid-frequency sonar exercise.

Basnight, D-Dare, said commission members "were left bewildered" by the information presented Monday. "It seems no definitive answers to their questions and concerns could be given," he wrote. "Repeatedly, the Navy staff used the term 'minimal impact' without giving a concrete definition. It seemed the Navy did not know the potential impacts of this facility." Basnight said requested an extension of the public comment period, saying more time is needed "for the results of the Oregon Inlet atrocity to be evaluated." The Navy announced almost simultaneously that it would extend the comment deadline from Dec. 28 to Jan. 30.

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