

NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL

1999

Council of 1000

August 27th

August 24, 1999

Dear Bud, I'm sending you this letter and hopes you will read it. Thank you!
Sincerely yours,
Heidi Nitze

Ms. Heidi Nitze

New York, NY

Dear Heidi,

I am writing to alert you that NRDC's Marine Mammal Protection Team is moving swiftly to head off a potentially devastating and wide-ranging threat to our planet's marine life.

I am referring to the U.S. Navy's new extended-range submarine detection system that will introduce noise into the world's oceans billions of times louder than that known to disturb whales.

This risky technology -- Low Frequency Active Sonar (LFA) -- would already have been deployed worldwide but for NRDC's discovery of this classified system back in 1995 and our immediate threat to sue the Navy.

The Navy had been testing this new system in complete secrecy for years -- in violation of our environmental laws -- when NRDC brought the sonar tests to light, thanks to the support of *Council of 1000* Members like you. We demanded that the Navy comply with the law and disclose how the sonar would affect millions of marine mammals.

As a result of our intervention -- and thousands of letters written by Members like you -- the Pentagon agreed to conduct a full-scale study of environmental impacts before putting the LFA system into use across 80% of the world's oceans.

Two weeks ago, the Navy released that draft Environmental Impact Statement. And today the Navy is once again planning to move ahead with deploying the LFA sonar system.

We must not let them! You see, the Navy's study has failed utterly to answer the two most crucial questions about its controversial sonar system:

How will this global, noise-producing system affect the long-term behavior of whales, dolphins and hundreds of other marine species? And will those effects, over an enormous geographic area, endanger the health of those species -- or even their very survival?

Until the Navy can answer these questions and ensure the well-being of our planet's fragile web of ocean life, it should NOT be allowed to deploy its sonar.

And that is why I am writing you and other Members of the *Council of 1000* today.

(over, please)

NRDC is gearing up to fight the next high-stakes round against the Pentagon. The health of the world's marine life -- including endangered populations of whales and other marine wildlife -- may be hanging in the balance.

Your most generous financial support is crucial. We need leadership gifts right away to challenge the Navy's inadequate review and to uphold our nation's laws in defense of marine life.

I urge you to send NRDC an emergency tax-deductible gift so that our Marine Mammal Protection Team can act -- in federal court if necessary -- to prevent deployment of a dangerous technology that could wreak long-term havoc with marine ecosystems.

Let me bring you up to date on the nature and threat of the LFA sonar program. This new sonar is designed to detect submarines over an extended range of ocean by bombarding them with extremely loud, low-frequency sound waves.

A single LFA transmitter would generate sound in the range of 235 decibels, flooding hundreds of square miles of ocean with noise. That level of noise is impossible for us to fathom. Two hundred thirty-five decibels is millions of times more intense than the 160-decibel level known to harm human divers.

(The difference between 160 and 235 decibels may not seem like a lot, but keep in mind that the decibel scale expresses sound in increasing orders of magnitude. In this way it can use very small numbers to compare sounds of radically different intensities, from a quiet breeze to a nuclear explosion.)

According to the Navy's own study, scientists briefly exposed a 32-year-old Navy diver to LFA sonar at a level of 160 decibels -- a fraction of the intensity at which the LFA system is designed to operate. After 12 minutes, the diver experienced severe symptoms, including dizziness and drowsiness. After being hospitalized, he relapsed, suffering memory dysfunction and seizure. Two years later he was being treated with anti-depressant and anti-seizure medications.

How will such intense noise affect whales and other marine species? No one really knows, but scientists have plenty of reason for concern.

Whales are equipped with exquisitely sensitive hearing for using sound to follow their migratory routes, to locate one another over great distances, to find food, and to care for their young. Noise that undermines their ability to hear these critical sounds can threaten their ability to function and survive.

As one scientist has succinctly put it: "A deaf whale is a dead whale." The sheer force of 235-decibel blasts would likely be enough to cause hearing loss, serious injury, or even death to whales and other marine mammals unfortunate enough to be swimming near an LFA transmitter.

The Navy's Environmental Impact Statement claims that the probability of such close encounters is "nearly zero" because ships carrying LFA would monitor the area for marine

(next page, please)

mammals before transmitting their sonar noise.

We think it defies common sense to believe the Navy can accurately monitor fast-moving populations of migratory whales, many surfacing infrequently, often in conditions of complete darkness, bad weather or choppy seas, and prevent those whales from falling victim to harmful levels of LFA noise.

One real-world case underlines the dangers. In 1996, twelve Cuvier's beaked whales were stranded alive off the coast of Greece. The whales were spread out over 20 miles of shoreline, suggesting that they succumbed to some unusual force affecting a large area. Scientists were at a loss to account for it until NATO revealed that one of its research vessels had been conducting LFA sonar experiments at the time and place where the strandings occurred!

But what concerns marine scientists even more than the short-term effects on individual animals is the potential long-term impact that the Navy's LFA system might have on the behavior and viability of entire populations of marine mammals.

The Navy's own environmental review determined that the large baleen whales were the marine animals "most likely to be affected by low-frequency sound." So the Navy carried out a series of tests to see what those effects might be.

That research showed that gray whales exposed to just 120 decibels of active sonar begin to swerve from their migration paths. The louder the sound, the more the whales deviated from their path. Keep in mind that the actual LFA system is designed to run at 235 decibels -- millions and even billions of times more intense than the test noise levels that disturbed the gray whales!

Navy tests with blue and fin whales showed that the LFA sonar caused many of them to cease vocalizing. And during a test with humpback whales -- whose songs are a primary mode of communication -- one third of the whales stopped singing altogether for a period of time.

The Navy would have us believe that these effects amount to "short-term behavioral responses" that have "no lasting biological significance"!

Leading marine experts strongly disagree with that conclusion. They say the Navy's limited study of only a few easily-measured, immediate reactions cannot tell us how long-term exposure to LFA sonar will affect the breeding, feeding, and migration of whales and other marine species.

And it is exactly these long-term effects on vital activities, say the experts, that pose the greatest risk of pushing endangered species over the brink into extinction.

In comments filed with the Navy in 1997, the Marine Mammal Commission warned that if the LFA system is deployed as proposed, then "all species and populations of marine mammals could possibly be affected." Those effects could range from "death from

(over, please)

lung hemorrhage to disruption of feeding, breeding, nursing, acoustic communication . . . and other vital behavior."

Given how little we really understand about the potential long-term dangers -- and given the life-and-death stakes for whales and other marine life -- doesn't it make sense to err on the side of caution? Don't we owe it to our planet and to future generations to delay deployment of LFA sonar until the Navy can assure the long-term well-being of marine life?

If we do not move swiftly to block the Navy now, they will soon be playing Russian Roulette with the entire global oceanic ecosystem!

With your financial help today, NRDC will take immediate and effective steps to prevent this reckless endangerment of our oceans. The laws are on our side. But it is up to you and me to make the U.S. Navy obey those laws!

Only NRDC has the legal muscle -- and the track record of courtroom success against the Pentagon -- to hold the military accountable before the nation and the world. But we cannot do that without your leadership support.

I urge you to give us the means to carry on this top-priority fight against the LFA sonar system. Your gift -- sent right now, today -- will enable NRDC to:

* Focus public attention and outrage. We will use the media and mailings to alert concerned citizens to the existence and dangers of the LFA program. And we will generate a flood of protest letters to the Navy through our NRDC website.

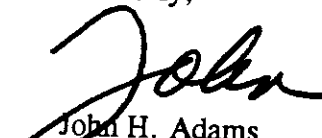
* Challenge the Navy's environmental review. We will retain leading scientists to show that the military has failed to answer the all-important questions about the long-term effects of LFA sonar on the health of marine species.

* Make the Pentagon obey our environmental laws. NRDC will ensure that the Navy comply with every law meant to protect marine wildlife. We will be fully prepared for a showdown in federal court if that becomes necessary to block deployment of the LFA system.

We can do all these things -- and win -- but only if we can be assured of your stalwart support. So I urge you, please use the enclosed personalized *Council of 1000* Reply Form to send NRDC your most generous possible Emergency Contribution.

Let me know right away that you will help us block the Navy's LFA program and prevent untold harm to our marine environment.

Sincerely,


John H. Adams
President

P.S. Please get back to me within the next ten days! Any delay in our legal response could hurt our chances to win this fight on behalf of marine mammals.