Navy clears the air about Electronic Warfare Range

A few misconceptions seem to be circulating about the U.S. Navy’s planned Pacific Northwest Electronic Warfare (EW) Range. The following information is intended to clarify the Navy’s intended use of electronic emitters on the range and reflects information in the Environmental Assessment, which was completed in August 2014.

The Navy intends to use electronic emitters to improve and support aircrew training for aviators from electronic warfare squadrons based at Naval Air Station (NAS) Whidbey Island training in the Northwest Training Range Complex. The Navy plans to use a fixed electronic emitter on Navy property at Pacific Beach and as many as three mobile emitter vans, that will set up occasionally in remote, unpopulated U.S. Forest Service lands in Washington State.

This type of instrumented electronic warfare training is already conducted by NAS Whidbey Island aviators in a simulated manner. Squadrons already practice flying in the airspace over the lands where the emitters would be placed, as was analyzed in prior Northwest Training Range Complex environmental planning. Adding this equipment to the periodic training will provide a more realistic training environment allowing the air crews to practice identifying and detecting the kind of electronic threats they can expect to encounter when they fly into hostile territory. It also enables them to gain required aircrew qualifications before deployments.

While the Navy uses simulators in many kinds of training, all simulators have limitations. Currently, electronic warfare aircraft crews home-based at NAS Whidbey Island must commute 400 miles to Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho to conduct this required, realistic training that the Pacific Northwest EW Range will now provide.
The emitters, which are at least 14 feet above the ground, put out directional electronic signals that will be pointed skyward toward the Pacific Ocean. Set up in this direction, the mobile emitters pose no threat to people or animals below the emitters on the ground. Risk to animals or humans would only occur if they put themselves in the direct path of the signal, above the emitter, and within 100 feet of the emitter beam for an extended period of time. As an added measure of safety, the Navy has mandated that crews shut down the emitters if people or animals are within the 100-foot safety zone around these vans when the systems are sending out the skyward signal.

The phrase “electromagnetic radiation” has been used to describe the emitters’ output. Electromagnetic radiation is not the same thing as nuclear radiation. There is no nuclear radiation associated with these electronic emissions. In this case, “radiation” is simply electronic energy, and the emitters use frequencies similar to those used for satellite communications, some Wi-Fi devices, cordless phones, Bluetooth devices and weather radar systems.

Training in the airspace using the emitters that make up the EW range will not involve the use of any weapons.

Conducting electronic warfare training near NAS Whidbey Island has long been a priority for the Navy. This training in the airspace of the Olympic military operations areas (MOAs) and the Okanogan and Roosevelt MOAs was analyzed in the Northwest Training Range Complex Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), which was completed in 2010. It is being reexamined in the Northwest Training and Testing EIS, which is still in development. When specific information and technology as to appropriate sites for the emitters to support this aerial training became available, the Navy prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) that was completed in August 2014 and issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). See http://go.usa.gov/kQ6e.

The Navy made a sincere effort to notify the public about the EA, as described in the FONSI. The Navy received no public comments by the August 15 deadline and the Navy’s FONSI was signed on August 28, 2014.

Although the Navy Record of Decision has been finalized, the U.S. Forest Service is still in the process of evaluating the Navy’s request for a special use permit on those aspects of the project that take place on U.S. Forest Service land. Navy action on U.S. Forest Service lands cannot occur until issuance of the permits. Those who wish to comment on the U.S. Forest Service’s potential issuance of a permit should contact Greg Wahl, forest environmental coordinator, Olympic National Forest, 1835 Black Lake Blvd SW, Olympia, WA 98512, email gtwahl@fs.fed.us, phone: 360-956-2375.

To reiterate, training conducted on the Pacific Northwest Electronic Warfare Range will not harm people or animals. This very specific training enables U.S. Navy pilots to safely and successfully counter enemy defenses when they go into harm’s way.