

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

[http://www.seattlepi.com/national/103402\\_fife09.shtml](http://www.seattlepi.com/national/103402_fife09.shtml)

## Toxic ammo is tested in fish areas

**U.S. Navy uses depleted uranium in coast waters; activists may go to court**

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The Navy routinely tests a weapon by firing radioactive, toxic ammunition in prime fishing areas off the coast of Washington, raising concerns from scientists, fishermen and activists.

The Navy insists the use of depleted uranium off the coast poses no threat to the environment. Depleted uranium, known as DU, is a highly dense metal that is the byproduct of the process during which fissionable uranium used to manufacture nuclear bombs and reactor fuel is separated from natural uranium. DU remains radioactive for about 4.5 billion years.

Cmdr. Karen Sellers, a Navy spokeswoman in Seattle, also said there are no hazards to the servicemen and women on board the ships, adding that "all crew members are medically monitored" to ensure their safety.

But a coalition of Northwest environmental and anti-war activists say they are considering seeking an injunction to halt the tests.

"The Navy is willing to put us all at risk, including its own sailors, to improve its war-fighting capabilities," said Glen Milner, of Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action, one of the groups weighing a suit to stop the Navy tests. Milner received information on the Navy's tests of depleted uranium ammunition off the coast in a memo released in response to a Freedom of Information Act request.

No major studies apparently have been done on the effects of such weapons in the ocean. Where depleted uranium munitions have been used in combat on land, such as in Iraq

### NAVY TEST FIRING

This is the area where the Navy routinely tests depleted uranium ammunition. The Navy says there are no safety hazards, but others question whether the use of the radioactive and toxic material in a prime fishing area poses threats both to the environment and to the sailors who operate the weapons.



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during the Gulf War, or in tests on land, such as Vieques island in Puerto Rico, they not only give off relatively small amounts of radiation, but produce toxic dust that can enter the food chain.

Seattle environmental attorney David Mann asked, "How can the Navy fire depleted uranium rounds and spread radioactive material into prime fishing areas off our coast?"

Sellers, however, said that only 400 to 600 rounds would be fired during a typical test at sea. And even though these tests have been going on since 1977, she said Navy environmental experts say that the DU dissolves very slowly in the ocean.

"It would be too diluted to distinguish from natural background uranium in the sea water," she said.

The weapon in question is the Phalanx, also known as a Close In Weapons System. Such a system is on virtually all U.S. Navy combat ships. It includes radar and rapid-fire 20mm guns. The guns are capable of firing up to 3,000 or 4,500 rounds per minute of depleted uranium, a superhard material prized for its armor-piercing ability.

The Defense Department says the military uses the munitions "because of DU's superior lethality against armor and other hard targets."

Although depleted uranium emits radiation, a second, potentially more serious hazard is created when a DU round hits a hard target. As much as 70 percent of the projectile can burn on impact, creating a firestorm of ceramic DU oxide particles. The residue of this firestorm is an extremely fine ceramic uranium dust that can be spread by the wind, inhaled and absorbed into the human body and absorbed by plants and animals, becoming part of the food chain.

Once in the soil, DU can pollute the environment and create up to a hundredfold increase in uranium levels in ground water, according to the U.N. Environmental Program

The Defense Department said DU munitions are "war reserve munitions; that is, used for combat and not fired for training purposes," with the exception that DU munitions may be fired at sea for weapon calibration purposes."

Another Navy spokeswoman described those firings at sea as "routine" and says they occur regularly off both the East and West coasts.

"If the firing is with DU, it's probably with what we call the Close in Weapons System, and it is routine," said Lt. Brauna Carl, a Navy spokeswoman in Washington, D.C., and a former gunnery officer who has worked with DU weapons.

When asked if the tests of DU rounds posed any health hazards, she replied, "God, I hope not. All I know is I haven't started glowing."

But Milner says, "It just makes sense that if DU can contaminate land and get into the food chain, then it would do the same thing in the sea."

Robert Alverson, president of the Fishing Vessel Owners Association in Seattle, said he was "very troubled" to hear that the Navy was using depleted uranium off the coast of Washington. "I don't like what I'm hearing," he said.

The Navy memo obtained by Milner described a June 2001 operation by the USS Fife, an Everett-based destroyer. The memo said the Fife would conduct gunnery operations with depleted rounds in what was described as areas W237C and W237F.

These areas are designated Navy Warning Areas and are about 25-100 miles off the coast between Ocean Shores and Ozette, south of Neah Bay, according to Milner.

"These are certainly prime fishing areas" for some salmon, flounder and other bottomfish, Alverson said. "It is folly to be testing anything in this area that might contaminate the natural food supply."

"How would the Navy feel about eating fish caught there?" he asked. Alverson said even the perception that fish might be contaminated could scare consumers and have dire consequences.

"If any species ever turns up with radiation, it would be devastating to the fishing industry," he said.

Leonard Dietz, a research associate with the private, non-profit Uranium Medical Research Centre in Canada and the United States, said that the degree of environmental contamination the DU rounds will cause in sea water depends on what kinds of targets were hit and how much DU was fired.

"Corrosion of the DU by sea water would occur over a long time," said Dietz, who with Asaf Durakovic, director of the center, and research associate Patricia Horan, published a landmark study on inhaled DU that showed Gulf War veterans still had DU in their urine nine years after the war.

"The end result is that the ocean becomes a dumping ground for the spent DU penetrators and they add to the (natural) uranium content of sea water," he said.

The Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action is one of five peace and environmental organizations already involved in a federal lawsuit against the Navy for violations of the Endangered Species Act over the Trident D-5 nuclear missile upgrade at the Bangor submarine base.

## **DEPLETED URANIUM HAZARDS**

The Pentagon has sent mixed signals about the effects of depleted uranium, saying there have been no

known health problems associated with the munition. At the same time, the military acknowledges the hazards in an Army training manual, which requires that anyone who comes within 25 meters of any DU-contaminated equipment or terrain wear respiratory and skin protection, and says that "contamination will make food and water unsafe for consumption."

Some researchers and several U.S. veterans organizations say they suspect depleted uranium of playing a role in Gulf War Syndrome, the still-unexplained malady that has plagued hundreds of thousands of Gulf War veterans.

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*On the Net:*

- *Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action:* [www.gzcenter.org](http://www.gzcenter.org)
- *U.S. Navy:* [www.navy.mil](http://www.navy.mil)
- *Iraqi birth defects, Gulf War Syndrome linked to depleted uranium*

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