

## An Open Letter to the Navy

August 20, 2015

Dear US Navy,

When the announcement about the collaboration between the Forest Service and the US Navy on the Olympic Peninsula first came to light last year, it took the public by complete surprise. Shock, dismay, anger, and resentment were felt by all of us when we found out that the Navy's military operations on wilderness roads and in skies over our communities and public lands would go forward despite not a single public comment being received. Although you admitted that you should have put public notices in local papers to alert us about your proposed operations, you still held firm, saying sorry people, you're too late, no comments will be accepted.

Thank goodness the Forest Service had to open a comment period before issuing their decision on whether or not to grant you a permit. 4,000 comments in a few weeks, all but 31 opposed, ought to have sent you both a message that something is very wrong.

To suddenly realize that the treasured quiet places we hold so dear, and the primary reasons why we live here, will be seriously affected by military operations was too much to process. To be hit with at least six separate but related NEPA documents in one year, some over 2,000 pages long, was too much to process. To try and navigate your complicated, acronym-laden web pages to find information is still too much to process. To be told that if we witness your fighter jets flying lower than allowed levels, that we should call a noise complaint hotline, where "a duty officer will take down the details," only to find there's no duty officer, ever, only a recording, and there's never any feedback, was too much to process. To ask that our own government conduct itself in an open and transparent manner when dealing with issues that affect our communities and lives is NOT too much to process.

So we invite you to do the following three things as a gesture of good faith to the public:

**1. Fix your noise complaint hotline.** Wherever it might be listed among your many web sites, it isn't found in a google search. Actually, this is what you get:

PHOTO of web site as was in the previous version

What *is* listed further down in that google search is a dot-org site whose connection to the Navy is unclear. The recording itself is unfriendly and uninformative, and it asks callers to give up their names, addresses and phone numbers before registering the complaint. You can probably imagine the public's reluctance to provide so much information to an agency that provides so little of it in return. Most people's impressions are that calls are not taken seriously. So, **please put a duty officer on that hot line. Re-do the recording and tell us what happens** when each complaint is made. Where do they go? Who sees them? What does the Navy do about it? And then, **LISTEN TO US. And respond.** Make a report to the public on

these noise complaints; how many came in, how many you investigated, and what you did about them. Have that report reviewed by an independent auditor. Answer the emails you get about jet noise. And put the report on your main web page, the one where you're going to tell people what the hot line number is. The reason you get so few complaints on that hot line is because it's widely regarded as a joke. Being more responsive could help mend fences with the public, which right now thinks you don't care.

**2. Stop the horrendously disruptive low jet swoops** over communities and the quiet places that have been beloved public lands for decades. People trying to enjoy the quiet in Olympic National Park are giving more and more negative feedback to the Park Service. Guests at the beautiful Kalaloch lodge and elsewhere on the West End are leaving early because your pilots won't stop coming in low overhead. Tourists are saying they'll never come back to the Olympic Peninsula because of the noise. Within hours of a recent court ruling in Seattle that went against a citizen's group claiming harm from jet noise, one or two Navy jets made two of the lowest, loudest passes over Port Townsend ever heard. Why? Was it a victory lap? Do you not realize that people take that as a gesture of contempt? You ask us to photograph the offending jets, but have you ever tried to photograph a low-altitude aircraft going 500 miles per hour? No wonder photos are so rare. But we will try. Noise is by far the biggest issue. Reduce it and people will be less angry with you.

**3. Fix your web pages.** They are among the most confusing and civilian-unfriendly in the entire federal government. While there is an entire page of the [Commander, Navy Region Northwest](#)'s page devoted to the Navy's regional marching band, there is not a single mention of any subscription service like other agencies have, to give people a chance to sign up and receive fair notice of public processes and review documents. As a result, we find out by chance that a comment period is open, and then, having lost valuable time to read, digest and participate in the public conversation that a law called NEPA is supposed to give us, we become ever more angry and frustrated. Other agencies with far less funding offer a subscription service, so why can't you? And if you make it so that people can pick the issues they wish to follow rather than get a massive feed that swamps their inboxes, you'll go a long way in improving communication with the public.

So, the above three things would be a start, a demonstration of good faith. But in no way will these three things alone ameliorate the byzantine and confusing ways in which the Navy conducts its NEPA processes, or excuse the deafening noise we are forced to endure. Those three requests are what good neighbors might ask of each other. If you do them, then the *real* public conversation that needs to take place can happen. Just so you know, we're not going anywhere, and we can make a lot of noise, too.

Sincerely,  
John and Jane Q. Public