

Sonar possible cause in whale deaths

■ Papers reveal government investigator removed naval sonar references in report.

THE WASHINGTON POST

Documents released under a court order show that a government investigator studying the stranding of 37 whales on the Carolina coast last year changed her draft report to eliminate all references to the possibility that naval sonar may have played a role in driving the whales ashore.

The issue of sonar's effects on whales is a sensitive topic for the Navy, which has clashed with environmentalists in

several court suits seeking to limit the use of the technology because of its possible effects on marine mammals.

The January 2005 stranding occurred shortly after naval maneuvers in the area off North Carolina, in the region where the Pentagon wants to build a controversial underwater sonar training range.

In her initial April, 2005 preliminary report on the Carolina deaths, Teri Rowles, coordinator of the National Marine Fisheries Service stranding response program, described injuries to seven of the whales that "may be indicative" of damage related to the loud blasts of sound from active sonar.

She also noted that one of the injuries

— air bubbles in the liver of a pilot whale — had previously been reported in mass strandings in the Bahamas and Canary Islands associated with sonar activity.

That report was made public this week after a federal judge in New York ordered its release to the Natural Resources Defense Fund (NRDC), an environmental group that had sued the agency over its refusal to release information on the Carolina stranding.

But before it was released by the NRDC, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration released an updated report — by Rowles and others — that did not mention sonar at all. In a cover letter to that report, NOAA offi-

cialists said the initial draft that mentioned sonar "contains early information that was later found to be inaccurate."

NRDC attorney Andrew Wexler said, however, that the second report "seems a lot more like spin than science." He said the absence of any reference to sonar was surprising because the evidence suggesting that sonar might have played a role hardly changed between the first and second drafts. What changed, he said, was some limited analysis by Rowles.

In an interview yesterday, Rowles said the references to sonar were removed because it was just one possible cause of the strandings.