

Cold war first-strike technology to dismantle

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A dubious collateral benefit of the "war on terrorism", this AP story gives a good background into the issues surrounding the extremely low frequency (ELF) radio transmitters. -- Space & Technology Editor

Navy to shut down sub radio transmitters

By Robert Imrie, Associated Press

http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2004-09-26-sub-radio-offair_x.htm

WAUSAU, Wis. ? With terrorism the new global threat, a network of radio antennas that let the Navy maintain secure communications with submarines at sea has become yet another Cold War relic.

On Thursday, the Navy will shut off its extremely low frequency (ELF) radio transmitters in northern Wisconsin and Michigan, saying the 15-year-old system, first proposed in the 1960s, is outdated and no longer needed. The Navy now will use 12 "very low frequency" transmitters located worldwide.

For years, peace activists and environmentalists targeted the two huge transmitters in the Chequamegon National Forest near Clam Lake and in Upper Michigan's Escanaba State Forest. Each transmitter consists of an antenna strung on 600 40-foot poles across dozens of miles of forest.

Critics contended that the system was for use during a first-strike nuclear attack, and that the radio waves could cause health and environmental problems. Demonstrations led to hundreds of arrests, some for trespassing onto the site and sawing down poles.

Steven Davis, spokesman for the Navy's Space and Navy Warfare Systems Command in San Diego, said the Navy spent about \$25 million on research and studies into public and environmental safety and found no problems.

But Sen. Russ Feingold, who has wanted to shut down ELF since 1993, said the Navy had a "bunker mentality" in trying to pretend the facility had a purpose.

"I do think the war on terror had something to do with this," Feingold said. "I think people are

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finally realizing we need to equip our military and everything we do toward the real threats."

Davis said closing ELF comes after a "re-evaluation" of the Navy's priorities.

"Even as recently as three years ago, the world has changed considerably," he said.

The Navy spent \$13 million a year to run both ELF transmitters, Davis said. He said the government has not yet determined the cost of dismantling the sites, which could take up to three years.

Some residents said they were concerned about the loss of jobs. Each site has one Navy worker and 27 civilian contractors, according to Davis.

"It is definitely going to hurt the economy," said Roger Anderson, co-owner of Deb's Y-Go-By, a bar, grill and bait shop in Clam Lake, a quiet tourist wayside about 40 miles from Lake Superior.

"Eventually, we knew this was going to be obsolete. It is just coming a little sooner than we thought," Anderson said. "Maybe they need the money for the Iraq war or the war on terrorism."

The Navy began using the \$400 million system in 1989. The project was nearly killed in the late 1970s but was revived by President Reagan in his plan to modernize strategic defenses.

The project was scaled down considerably from the original 1960s plan, which included a grid of 6,200 miles of buried cable and 100 transmitters that would withstand a nuclear war.

Jerry Holter, 74, who lives about a mile from the Wisconsin transmitter, said he believes Project ELF served its purpose.

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"It was a great deterrent to nuclear war against the United States. When we were in the Cold War, the Russians knew that if they hit us we could hit back twice as bad," he said. "So it kept them in tow. Without the system, we were left out in the cold. We needed ELF."

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