

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NOAA PACIFIC GROVE (CA) FACILITY

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For nearly 70 years, the Pacific Grove (California) Federal facility has hosted a variety of government functions and services supporting to the Nation's security and prosperity. Located at 1352 Lighthouse Avenue in Pacific Grove, California, it is a prominent feature on the westward most point of the Monterey Peninsula.

Its original name "Punta de los Pinos" was given by the Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino in 1602 based on the thick grove of pines near the coast there. In 1852, shortly after the US acquired Alta California from Mexico, the Secretary of the Treasury ordered the building a lighthouse at Point Pinos, the rocky southern entrance to Monterey Bay. The government ultimately purchased 92 acres of the Rancho Punta de los Pinos for this purpose. The 4.2-acre property where the facility is located, near the historic Point Pinos Lighthouse, is part of this original purchase. [link](#)

Naval Air Intercept Training Facility Point Pinos

After World War II, military experts raised concerns over U.S. air defenses and the vulnerability of domestic air bases to long-range attack. The Navy had gained significant experience in air defense and the development of radar systems during the war and was carrying out surface and airborne radar surveillance patrols. As the Cold War heightened during the Korean War, the Pentagon constructed this facility on Point Pinos in 1952 as part of a Pacific coastal radar defense system. It became operational in June 1954. [link](#)

Officially called the Naval Air Intercept Training Facility Point Pinos, its principal role was to train Navy pilots and air controllers to use modern radar to intercept hostile aircraft. It was under the administrative control of Naval Air Facility (NAF) Monterey. The Facility also provided aircraft tracking support to carriers operating off northern California and refresher training for Fleet air controllers, making 1653 aircraft intercepts in one month (Bureau of Naval Personnel, 1961). [link](#)

The Facility operated an emergency IFF (Identification, Friend or Foe) watch. It also assisted distressed pilots for emergency landings at NAF Monterey or NAF Moffett and supported regional search and rescue operations, including assisting the Coast Guard searching for a lost fishing boat.

The three-story, 11,220 sqft building is a cast-in-place concrete building with shear walls, floor, and roof joists and beams all of concrete. Said to be able to survive a direct bomb blast, the exterior walls are nearly 18 inches thick, reinforced with large gravel and iron rebar throughout. The interior walls and floors also are heavy-duty reinforced concrete. The original building had very few windows. A series of subfloors were constructed between the primary floors to carry the large cables servicing the radar and electronic

equipment. Multiple underground vaults and trenches throughout the property also held cables and antennae.

External equipment included a variety of radar and communications antennae and electronic equipment. The facility had bachelors' quarters for enlisted radarmen and electronic technicians, and a kitchen and outdoor recreational courts.

Although the necessity and associated costs of constructing, operating, and maintaining a domestic border patrol system was a concern to some in the Navy, they began detailed planning of air surveillance radar patrols in 1953, using Navy land-based aircraft and radar picket ships reporting to a centralized Air Force air defense control. A system of two coastal radar barriers – Pacific and Atlantic - was established in September 1954, although the planned system was never built out to its full plan. The primary reason for the Navy's reluctance to assume the barrier patrol mission was that the cost of operating and maintaining the radar systems would divert resources from other Naval missions. This was confirmed over time, as was the unfounded concern over the prospects of long-range attacks.

U-2 reconnaissance photography in 1957 showed that the US indeed held the “bomber gap” lead. However the launch of the Soviet Sputnik satellite in October of that year raised fears that the US trailed in the long-range “missile gap”. This became the primary focus for domestic defense as well as the nation's military and civilian science and technology planning. The Navy moved quickly in the early 1960s to dismantle the coastal radar systems and end this mission. The Pacific Grove facility is the sole remaining building from this era's defense infrastructure.

US Navy Fleet Numerical Weather Facility

Although its air intercept mission was over, the Navy found a new use for the Facility. The Navy Numerical Weather Problems (NANWEP) group was established in Suitland, Maryland in 1958 to produce and disseminate weather forecasts and products the Navy's global fleet. It moved to the Monterey area under the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) the following year. The Fleet Numerical Weather Facility was established there in 1961. The Pacific Grove facility served as its early home, before it relocated in 1974 to its present location north of the Monterey Regional Airport, known as the NPS Annex. It became the Fleet Numerical Meteorology and Oceanography Center (FNMOC) in 1993.

Navy Recruit Command (NRC) Pacific Grove

Subsequently the Navy repurposed the Point Pinos facility as a naval reserve center. The remodeled Navy Recruit Command (NRC) Pacific Grove added some windows, an auditorium, and a full on-site medical and dental clinic on the second floor. The lower open floor was the drill hall. The exterior also featured a sand volleyball court and large BBQ pit. With an active duty staff of seven, the NRC served as a drilling site for six reserve units, including a Reserve cruiser with seven officer and 40 enlisted billets, and a

Medical Reserve Unit staffed by seven officer and 10 enlisted billets. Other units included Weapons Station, SEABEE, and Destroyer-Tender Detachments, a Volunteer Training Unit, and a Sea Cadet Unit. The Reserve Center conducted drills two weekends each month.

NOAA Pacific Fisheries Environmental Laboratory

The present-day SWFSC Environmental Research Division was formed in 1969 as the NOAA Pacific Environmental Group (PEG), one of two national laboratories (the other being the now-defunct Atlantic Environmental Group) dedicated to provide science-based data products to support fisheries research and management. PEG became the Pacific Fisheries Environmental Group (PFEG), an administrative unit within the NMFS Southwest Fisheries Science Center to better reflect its regional fisheries research role. It was co-located with the US Navy's FNMOC, where the Group's staff and computers were housed in a succession of World War II-era Quonset huts and former barracks and later temporary trailers.

The strategic location of the group on the Monterey Peninsula is based on the long-standing association with FNMOC and an early "dual use" application of military data for civilian purposes. This close relationship gives NMFS access to the Navy's global environmental database, from which its scientists develop and disseminate data sets and associated products and environmental indices relevant to fisheries, protected species, and marine ecosystems. Fisheries scientists and resource managers use these products to characterize ocean properties and processes occurring within fishery habitats. Its location also allowed numerous close collaborations and formal relationships to develop with the many laboratories and institutions in the Monterey Bay area ocean science community.

The 1993 Defense Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission recommended closing NRC Pacific Grove and disposing of the property. It closed in July 1994. Rep. Sam Farr, a long-time ocean protection and conservation champion, recognized the value of this site and the need for a permanent and adequately sized home for PFEG, and arranged a transfer of the property from the Department of the Navy to NOAA in 1996. PFEG was rebranded the Pacific Fisheries Environmental Laboratory (PFEL) in recognition of its new permanent facility. In addition to the NMFS staff, the Laboratory served as an office for the NOAA NESDIS CoastWatch West Coast Regional Node, NOAA Office of Law Enforcement, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries also used the facility for storage and other functions.

As part of a SWFSC reorganization in 2005, the Environmental Research Division (ERD) was created and located at PFEL. ERD provides innovative science-based analyses, products, and information on environmental variability to meet the research and management needs of the SWFSC, NMFS, and NOAA. ERD conducts research on fishery-related effects of natural environmental variability over a broad range of scientific, management, and operational concerns of the government and the fishing industry. As a part of this work, ERD develops and maintains an extensive database of environmental observations.

Despite the challenges of maintaining and modifying an older hardened building, PFEL facility staff made a number of improvements for those working and visiting there. A number of new offices were created and windows added. Major repairs to the roof and heating system were made and energy efficient ceiling lights were installed. Repainting the exterior walls with mero-elastic paint reduced ongoing damage due to water seepage into the walls and interior. To house the West Coast Regional Node of NOAA CoastWatch, a trailer was added in 2003. A generator was installed in 2008 to provide uninterrupted power and cooling to the ERD computer server room.

The greatest risks PFEL personnel faced were errant golf balls from the adjacent Pacific Grove Golf Links breaking lab and vehicle windows, and an occasional mountain lion hunting the local deer population. Following the 9/11 attacks, NOAA conducted Anti-Terrorism Risk Assessments (ATRA) of the facility in 2004, 2007, and 2010. The ATRA reports recommended several critical upgrades to reduce terrorist risks to the remote location. These included repairing perimeter fencing, improving exterior security lighting, protecting windows with Mylar sheeting, and replacing externally facing door hinges.

The facility was made more amenable to visitors with on-site and web-based interpretative exhibits and information, wheelchair access, and removal of barbed wire from the perimeter fence. Invasive plants were removed and replaced with native plants. Clearly the highlight is the 2007 “Green Seas Blue Seas” mural. After many years as the “white bunker” on Point Pinos, NMFS scientists collaborated with renowned artist Ray Troll, muralist Roberto Salas, and the City of Pacific Grove to design and install a 300-foot mural relaying the ecological, scientific, historical, and cultural elements of the nearby Pacific Ocean and the Monterey Peninsula.

The FY2013 President’s budget reduced NOAA’s appropriations, necessitating the closure of the PFEL Pacific Grove facility and other agency properties. Per the Federal Assets Sale and Transfer Act of 2016 (FASTA), the Public Buildings Reform Board identified PFEL and 11 other Federally owned properties as high value assets (HVA) and recommended them to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for disposition in a manner that will “obtain the highest and best value for the taxpayer”. [Link](#)

NOAA vacated the site in 2014 and staff were relocated to leased office space in Monterey and the SWFSC labs in La Jolla and Santa Cruz. The facility is currently only occupied by a FWS property caretaker, a NOAA employee who works part-time at the facility, and another NOAA employee who commutes from Santa Cruz to perform information technology and facility maintenance on a part-time basis. The Department of Commerce has indicated that these occupants can vacate when necessary.

The General Services Agency (GSA), the agency responsible for the use and sale of Federal real property assets, decided to focus on individual sales tailored to each property rather than a single, portfolio offering for the sale of the HVA properties. Accordingly, the PFEL property will be advertised for individual sale on GSA’s auction website. [link](#)