

**Analysis of Noise Complainants to the Navy in 2020**  
**Prepared by Citizens of Ebey's Reserve**  
**August 2021**

Citizens of the Ebey's Reserve (COER) submitted a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request from the Navy seeking all telephone and email noise complaints about the Growlers received between 1018 and 2020. The information obtained is summarized here.

**Number of Complaints**

A summary of the complaint numbers for 2020 is presented in Tables 1 and 2. A news release was also prepared and is available at <https://citizensofebeysreserve.com/2021/06/15/navy-loses-email-complaints-on-growler-noise/>, and Whidbey News Times wrote a related article: <https://www.whidbeynewstimes.com/news/navy-noise-complaint-data-lost-in-glitches/> .

**Table 1.--Number of phone and email complaints by month in 2020, as tallied from the Navy's FOIA'd spreadsheet.**

Month	Total: Phone & Some <sup>1</sup> Email Complaints
January	73
February	160
March	32
April	249
May	153
June	688
July	598
August	539
September	463
October	343
November	255
December	401
MINIMAL TOTAL <sup>1</sup>	3,897

<sup>1</sup> Minimal total because a large but unknown number of email complaints were not received by the Navy from August to January 31, 2020, due to email snafu.

**Table 2.--Number of phone and email complaints by region in 2020, as tallied from the Navy's FOIA'd spreadsheet. Note that there were only 102 days of FCLPs at the OLF.**

Region	Total: Phone & Some Email <sup>1</sup> Complaints	Notes
North Whidbey Island	381	Oak Harbor
Central Whidbey Island	2002	Coupeville (1759) and Greenbank (143)
Port Townsend	587	Other than Central Whibey, the next most affected by FCLPs at the OLF.
South Whidbey Island	116	Freeland southward
Other Olympic Peninsula	209	All but Port Townsend
Camano Island & LaConner	350	
Anacortes & San Juan Islands	221	
Other areas	31	
MINIMAL TOTAL <sup>1</sup>	3,897	

<sup>1</sup> Minimal total because a large but unknown number of email complaints were not received by the Navy from August to January 31, 2020, due to email snafu.

Due to its proximity to the OLF, Central Whidbey citizens complained at a rate nearly 4 to 10 times that of the other areas. Among the other areas complaint numbers were relatively similar, revealing a common dislike of and problems with Growler noise throughout Whidbey Island and adjacent communities.

Between August and March 2021 no emails to the complaint line were received because the email system for complaints was taken down and not replaced until early March 2021. Navy does not know how many complaints were emailed in but not received during that time. And the email problem did not kick emails back to the sender. Therefore, complainants believed their email complaints were being received and would have had no reason discontinue sending email complaints during the inactivated period. A few post-August email complaints that happened to be sent to the Public Affairs Officer (different email address than the complaint address) were, however, transferred over into the data base.

Prior to the email going down in August about 7% to 10% of the complaints in the data base were emails. Between August 1 and December 31 there were 2,001 phone complaints in the data base. At the 7-10% email rate, that means about 140 to 200 emails were not received, increasing the total to about

4,000 complaints in 2000. And anonymous (name, address not given) calls or emails are apparently not included in the data base unless they can be linked by a revealed phone number or email address to prior calls or emails that logged the personal data<sup>1</sup>. The number of such dismissed complaints is unknown, but could be fairly large. Hence the actual complaint total is greater than 4,000.

But that number needs still additional expansion. Here's why. Iterative (2 or more) complaints, whether by phone, email, or combo, that are received within some unspecified timeframe are lumped as one complaint, even though the substance of the complaints may differ.<sup>2</sup> Hence, say in a family where mom is trying to watch TV, dad is trying to have a business phone conversation, and their two teens are trying to do homework, they could each be highly annoyed and phone in to complain, but because it is the same phone number, their four individual complaints would be counted as one. Now flip side, let's say only dad phoned and explains that all four family members are distressed for various reasons; still those would count as one. So that 4,000+ tally becomes even larger.

## **Number of Complainants**

While each logged-in complaint gets a unique ID number linked to a Caller ID number, it is unclear whether the Caller ID number is specific to a name of a given individual or is specific to a phone number or email address that could be used by multiple people (presumably family members).

Based on examination of the spreadsheet the unique Caller ID numbers appear to be sequentially assigned (1, 2...133...4475...etc. to x). Based on those ID numbers, it appears, there have been at least 4,500 complainants (i.e., unique Caller IDs). While probably not all 4500 complainants phoned or emailed in 2020, a large portion surely did. Importantly, the callers who did complain only represent a small portion of the total population upset by Growler noise for several reasons. An unknown percentage of the unhappy distressed population did not know about the complaint line, or did not want to provide their name/address/phone number, or were too intimidated or timid to phone, or decided it would do no good so did not bother, or relied on someone else in the family or friend group to do it, etc. The real number of unhappy individuals is likely 10 or more times 4,500.

## **Responses to Complainants**

As explained by LCDR James Carson to COER attorney Zachary Griefen (March 23, 2021), the Navy lost all its responses to complaints from January to early October 2020:

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1 Each call or email in the spreadsheet is assigned a unique ID number linked to a "Caller ID" number, which in turn is linked to a name and address. Every complaint in the spreadsheet has that data. If the complainant's phone has been previously linked to name and address and the incoming phone number is revealed (not blocked), then the required data may pop up, facilitating inclusion of the complaint in the data base. But that "if" is unknown. Without such linkage being established, the personal data would be unknown, and it appears the complaint could not be included since all complaints include the redacted personal data cells. That applies similarly to emailed complaints.

2 One of the spreadsheet columns makes note of complainants who called and/or emailed back during the same general timeframe, but those addition complaints are not assigned as discrete complaints (i.e., they are not counted).

Regarding the records lost in a computer hardware failure, all of the records lost were emails from NASWI's Community Planning Liaison Officer (CPLO) to members of the public that had sent a complaint to NASWI regarding aircraft noise. Prior to your request, the CPLO had archived all his previous emails that would be responsive to your request on his harddrive but unfortunately his harddrive failed in early October 2020 and attempts to recover the data stored on it were unsuccessful. He was unable to provide these lost emails, though he knows they would have been responsive. We do not know how many emails were lost. The email records released to you are those responsive records still in existence because they were created after the harddrive failure.

There were 18 responses (most all by phone) to complaints between October 1 and December 31—i.e., the latter part of 2020 when responses were not lost. During that period there were 999 complaints. Hence, the response rate was 1.8%.

## **Other Observations**

One spreadsheet column notes whether the caller is a frequent caller. It seems nearly all complainants are identified as frequent. Presumably, the purpose of that designation is for the Navy to somehow try to claim that it's just a handful of folks raising a stink over jet noise. Any claim like that is not cogent or defensible. The complaint line is not a survey, which is the only way the Navy could ascertain the various levels of animus over the Navy and its Growler noise problem. That column has no more value or propriety than would a column revealing racial identity, gender, or religious affiliation. If a person, phones in twice, he/she may have two different things to complain about, or perhaps is twice as upset as the next guy, or is so upset he/she forgot they had already phoned in (that's pretty upset).

The number of complaints is not and should not be used as an index of the number of people upset during a given training operation or training period. Each day thousands of folks who may be mildly to severely annoyed by Growler training do not bother to complain for a wide variety of reasons. Really, the only use of the complaint line is to create the false impression that the Navy is responsive to civilian gripes, yet in reality, very few complaints are ever responded to—about 1.8%—and those that are, tend to be related to questioning-type complaints rather than annoyance complaints. So if you have a question, the Navy may respond, but if you are just grouching, the Navy could care less.

## **Recommendations**

- 1) Complainants need to include their name and address and phone, because otherwise, the complaint's issue may not get entered into the data base. (This seems to be consistent with the message on the phone line indicating the complainant must leave location data and phone number and that Navy will not investigate a complaint without that information.)
- 2) Complainants should specify how many people in the household are highly annoyed and why (e.g., disturbed dinner with family, or homework, or walking the dog, etc.).

- 3) Complainants phoning/emailing in more than once during a noise event, should explain why they are doing so again.
- 4) Complainants, on each call or email, should specifically convert complaints to an ending question (why this or that?) and then request a detailed explanation.
- 5) Navy should cease notating frequent callers (delete from the data entry protocol), increase its frequency of responses, cease to lump iterative calls from the same phone number or emails from the same address and tally each as a separate complaint, and fully document the objectives for the complaint record—i.e., how it uses the complaint information.
- 6) Navy should include an “Unknown Caller” category for complainants who fail to identify themselves or are otherwise identifiable by name, address, phone number.