

Baseline Will Help Researchers Identify Tsunami Debris

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Jennifer Canfield/KMXT

Efforts to deal with debris from last year's Japanese tsunami are moving forward. Dave Gaudet is the marine debris program coordinator for the Marine Conservation Alliance Foundation. He says that politicians and policy-makers are finally starting to address the issue.

-- (Debris Monitoring 1 :19 "There hasn't been anybody politically that's really started to watch this, until now. It's becoming much more front and center. People realize that it's probably coming. We don't know how much. We've got an idea when it might get here. We don't know what we're going to do if it shows up in force.")

This morning Senator Lisa Murkowski hosted a discussion with Gaudet, Peter Murphy from NOAA's Marine Debris Program and Kristin Ryan from the state's Department of Environmental Conservation.

As for Senator Mark Begich, this week he sent a letter to NOAA head Jane Lubchenco stating his support for NOAA's Marine Debris Program and Hawaiian Senator Daniel Inouye's Trash Free Seas Act.

The mass of debris, which Gaudet says satellites lost track of on April 14th of last year, is expected to hit the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge as soon as this spring. That prediction is based on research done by the University of Hawaii. The last known sighting of the debris field was last fall.

-- (Debris Monitoring 2 :20 "There was a Russian ship that went through the debris field in about mid to late September and they were pretty positive it was the debris field because they found such things as an overturned boat. They saw lots of household appliances floating such as stoves, microwaves, TVs and things like that.")

Gaudet says there are two ways marine debris can travel. Much of what is already showing up on beaches

are light, foam floats that travel with the wind. Heavier items travel with the ocean's currents. Finding Japanese buoys on Alaska's shores is not unusual, so having a baseline is key to understanding how much debris is actually from the tsunami. Gaudet says MCA has been doing marine debris cleanups on Alaska beaches since 2003. They know that fishing lines, nets and water bottles make up the bulk of "normal" debris.

-- (Debris Monitoring 3 :25 "Because the tsunami just took homes and businesses and washed them back into the sea, if the debris starts to show up we would expect to see a different type of composition. We also might see items that are clearly marked, that they were from that part of Japan. They might have the town's name on them or something like that. That would tell us that it was very likely to be from the tsunami.")

Part of the plan that emerges might be that observers are dispatched to beaches where no baseline for marine debris has been established. Gaudet says a more concrete strategy for monitoring debris from the tsunami should emerge quickly. He's already enlisted the help of locals in the communities of Kodiak, Craig, Sitka and Yakutat. Gaudet expects monitoring to officially begin sometime next week.

NOAA's Marine Debris Program Tsunami FAQs: <http://marinedebris.noaa.gov/info/japanfaqs.html>

Marine Conservation Alliance Foundation Survey Results: http://www.mcafoundation.org/tsunami_debris.html

Sen. Murkowski's Roundtable Discssion (10:30 am):
http://murkowski.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?p=Events&ContentRecord_id=9d023292-3297-408e-abc2-830918da3d44

Sen. Inouye's Trash Free Seas Act: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/D?d112:1:./temp/~bdlblc:@@L&summ2=m&/home/LegislativeData.php>

