Tsunami Debris Not Dangerously Radioactive, Scientists Say

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{audio}/images/stories/mp3/120319_tsunami_debris_no_radiation.mp3{/audio}

This illustration is created from data run through NOAA's Ocean Surface Current Simulation (OSCURS). The different colors are a prediction of the movement of debris from the Japanese tsunami over five years. Year 1= red; Year 2= orange; Year 3= yellow; Year 4= light blue; Year 5= violet

Jennifer Canfield/KMXT

It's been just over a year since a 9.0-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Japan. The ensuing tsunami devastated Japan's coastline and killed nearly 16,000 people. While Japan continues to recover from the disaster, debris has started to show up on U.S. shores. Earlier this month debris was reported on Sitka's shores and some was found on Kodiak's beaches last December. Researchers say people should not be concerned about overexposure to radiation.

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Kathryn Higley is the head of the Department of Nuclear Engineering and Radiation Health Physics at Oregon State University.

Higley says she and other researchers feel confident that while debris found on shore might set off your Geiger counter, the level of radiation will be negligible.

"One
the tsunami and the earthquake happened a couple of days really before any release from the plant occurred, so this material was offshore. That's the first thing; it wasn't right up against the plant. The second thing is that a lot of these contaminants are very water soluble. Even with the release from the air that deposited on the debris field which is floating in the ocean and also some of the releases out from the plant, it's going to get diluted because of salt water, rain, waves and the like that are going to wash it off the debris. So it's possible that we can detect it because we have really, really sensitive equipment, but in terms of threat and hazard to people it's not radiation. I would personally be more concerned because it's debris coming from industrialized areas where you have the equivalent of Home Depot, you have petroleum processing facilities, agricultural areas with pesticides and herbicides and things like that, you know, I'm not concerned about the radiation effects. I'm more concerned about the fact that this is debris from an industrialized area and you have to be aware that there may be hazardous chemicals and other things in it so you treat it with caution."

Unopened
bottles containing chemicals or other compounds likely pose the most danger to beachcombers. Higley says people need to treat all debris with caution, though not because of risk of radiation exposure. Below we've linked to several resources available or coastal community residents who are concerned about how to deal with tsunami debris.

NOAA Marine Debris Program FAQs

NOAA Marine Debris Monitoring Program

NOAA Marine Debris Tracker App

International Pacific Research Center at the University of Hawai'i

Marine Conservation Alliance Debris Monitoring Program