

Begich Talks Marine Debris While in Kodiak

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

In two weeks local volunteers will take to Kodiak's beaches in the first ever Coast Walk, a two-day event devoted to marine debris clean up and removal. Participants can choose one of the 81 road system beaches, and Kodiak Island Trails Network will provide the bags and materials to clean them up.

While it's unlikely that Alaska Senator Mark Begich will be in Kodiak during the event, he did take some time during his most recent visit to learn more about the growing problem of marine debris. KMXT's Brianna Gibbs has more.

On Saturday, Crab Fest attendees shouted and cheered as rides rumbled along and music boomed through loudspeakers scattered throughout the festival. You could faintly hear those sounds across the water, in Gibson Cove, where the atmosphere was very different.

Outside the NOAA law enforcement office, Senator Mark Begich toured a field of marine debris collected from beaches in the Kodiak Archipelago. Giant white bags, filled to the brim with abandoned buoys, derelict fishing nets and massive quantities of Styrofoam, surrounded Begich and ITN Director Andy Schroeder.

"What's some of the stuff that you get here?"

"So since the tsunami we're seeing a lot more foam, and we used to see less than 10 percent foam, now that number's just gone way up."

"Is there any way to have a test of what this is? In the sense of the materials so you can determine maybe where it's manufactured. You know if we can do CSI stuff, why can't you do CSI on this. Because obviously the product is manufactured somewhere so it's a certain type of chemical make up of this product."

"Well what you're talking about is science and research, and if I could draw a parallel to climate change. In the ocean you have H2O and then in the atmosphere you have nitrogen and oxygen, but both of them -- huge volumes. Something that was so big we used to think that we couldn't really impact it or affect it in any way, but now we realize we're at that tipping point where we realize we can. Climate change, again, hard to describe -- some people still doubt its existence (I serve with some of those people). It's the same with marine debris. With climate change, all of emphasis now is on researching it understanding the problem. I don't feel like there is enough of that with marine debris. We don't fully understand the impacts. We don't fully understand what plastics in our environment or in our food chain can do to human health. And I would like to see more research to both tracing this and on downstream of the marine debris event. What are the impacts?"

Begich said marine debris should be approached as an international issue, and hopes there will be a greater opportunity to do just that with former Senator John Kerry now serving as Secretary of State.

"It's an international issue it's not just a national issue. It's not just here. When he was Senator Kerry he and I worked on several things on oceans, and now to have him as secretary is actually an opportunity that may have not existed before to bring in other countries and say look, we can argue all we want about who's causing it, how it's being caused, but we know it's happening. So the better question is what are we going to do?"

In February, Begich was appointed to the Homeland Security Subcommittee on Emergency Management and Intergovernmental Affairs. He said this position could serve the marine debris clean up issue well, especially if it is approached as a national disaster.

"We're obviously dealing with a lot down in Oklahoma right now, but that's an emergency you see right away. This emergency, this disaster, you will not see right away. It's a prolonged, slow, evolving disaster. And you can make two choices. You can deal with it now, or you can wait. And when you wait, I can guarantee you it's going to be a lot more expensive. But it's a great debate because as we sit there in the committee and talk about earthquakes or storm Sandy, or what happened in Oklahoma. People see those, they're visual right away. Volcano exploding -- they see it. This, it's hard for them to grab onto. And it's a much harder education to get people to say OK, we get it, we may not feel it, it may not have an impact on someone's life today, but if we let it go to one of our most important food stocks -- fish, you're going to see an impact."

Begich said one of his goals in the coming months will be to get more funding for marine debris clean ups, be it through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, also known as FEMA, or somewhere else.

"For Japan to bring millions to the table, and why we don't match that dollar for dollar, in new dollars, not just existing, when they recognize the impact that they've had."

"We need to, and we're going to be advocating for federal assistance

as we work. Now the state money will get us started, and I'm really happy to see them stepping up. But this is multiyear and cost more than what they've put forward so far.

That was Kodiak Island Trails Director Andy Schroeder talking with Alaska Senator Mark Begich about marine debris. Begich was in Kodiak over the weekend and toured a marine debris sorting yard to see first hand what is being collected on Alaska's beaches.