ITN Clean-Up on Tugidak Yields 13-Plus Tons of Marine Debris

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

There’s no question that marine debris has been washing up on Alaska’s shores for hundreds of years. This summer six Kodiak Island Trails Network staffers and 13 volunteers made it their mission to put a sizeable dent in debris washed up on a remote island southwest of Kodiak.

Nobody lives on Tugidak Island. It’s 67 square miles of treeless tundra swept by cold and often extreme winds, about 375 miles southwest of Anchorage. And because of ocean currents, the island has become a dumping ground for marine debris. So much so that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has contributed almost $120,000 to ITN for a two-year clean up project.

For six weeks this summer a handful of folks called Tugidak home and worked daily to clean up more than 26,000 pounds of marine debris. Tom Pogson is the director of marine programs for ITN and spent a good chunk of the summer on Tugidak.

“There’s roughly 130 super sacks that are plum full of debris. There’s lots of heavy sacks, and I’m only assuming that many of the sacks are 200 pounds or heavier, and some of them are much heavier than that. Then there’s 26,000 pounds that would have been removed.”

Pogson said that only includes items that are in the sacks, and many things were too big or unwieldy. Things like a lifeboat from Shell Oil’s drilling rig, Kulluk. It washed up on Tugidak after the Kulluk broke free of its tow across the Gulf of Alaska and ran hard aground on nearby Sitkalidak Island, New Year’s Eve.

“And we did dismantle it and remove it. And it also will factor into the weight. Some of it didn’t end up in a sack. We got some metal objects that didn’t fit. These were poles associated with long line gear. There was a handrail from the skiff, which didn’t fit in the super sack and then a very large Yokohama fender that was removed out of a wetland, put on a trailer and taken up

to pick up point.”

The pick up point was the location on the far end of the island that all of the debris was transported to. The point provides better access for the landing craft Lazy Bay, which will collect all of the debris gathered this summer and bring it back to Kodiak where it will be officially weighed. Pogson said the total poundage collected is just an estimate until those numbers come in.

The agreement with NOAA requires 40,000 pounds of debris to be collected each year from Tugidak. Pogson said they were probably close to that amount, even considering the remoteness, weather and other bumps in the road the project encountered.

“And I can tell you that in a lot of cases the weather was horrendous. A lot of cases there was good weather. And in those days it was easy to go out and get 1,000 or 2,000 pounds a day. But even on days in which the weather was horrendous you could go out for a few hours and clearly come out with big balls of lines, strings of buoys that were put on rope that we found there. It was pretty easy to generate 500 to 1,000 to 2,000 pounds. There was just a lot of stuff there, and a lot of it was very heavy.”

Volunteers and ITN staff members typically swapped out every one to two weeks when a supply plane flown by Jay Wattum of Vertigo Air made the trek to Tugidak. They slept in tents and utilized an old shed that was repurposed into a kitchen and living area. Pogson said the group encountered some difficulties with equipment, as well as weather preventing volunteers from making it to the island regularly. The organization ended up cancelling one full week of volunteer work because of those delays.

“If we had another week of volunteers, maybe the number would be much higher, I suspect it would be. But it is what it is what it is, and it’s a difficult place to work, it’s hard to get there, etc. From all stand points, even given the logistical difficulties we consider it a huge success. Lots of enthusiasm for next year and more marine debris clean ups.”

Pogson said a number of local and statewide organizations also helped make the summer a success. The grant from NOAA is for two years, so it’s expected that ITN crew and volunteers will head south next summer for another season of marine debris clean up.