



**TESTIMONY OF
REAR ADMIRAL CARI B. THOMAS
ASSISTANT COMMANDANT FOR RESPONSE POLICY
ON
“STEMMING THE TIDE: THE U.S. RESPONSE TO TSUNAMI RELATED MARINE DEBRIS”**

**BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OCEANS, ATMOSPHERE, FISHERIES, AND COAST GUARD**

MAY 17, 2012

Introduction

Good morning Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss with you the Coast Guard's roles and authorities to protect U.S. waters and shorelines from the potential impacts of marine debris created during the 2011 Japan Tsunami.

Summary

The Coast Guard, as a member of the Interagency Marine Debris Coordinating Committee (IMDCC) supports the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in NOAA's roles as the Chair of the IMDCC and the lead agency for conducting research, monitoring, prevention, and reduction activities for marine debris.

The Marine Debris Research, Prevention and Reduction Act of 2006 identifies the Coast Guard as one of the agencies that NOAA should coordinate with to address marine debris issues like those caused by the 2011 Japan Tsunami. The Coast Guard is supporting NOAA's marine debris monitoring and tracking efforts to ensure safe navigation for shipping and to protect the marine environment by actively monitoring for debris that would create a potential hazard to navigation or present a substantial threat of pollution.

Coast Guard Authorities Related to Marine Debris

Coast Guard actions in support of NOAA are based on the type of the debris. While NOAA is the lead Federal agency for marine debris and the Coast Guard supports NOAA, there are certain instances in which Coast Guard authorities result in the Coast Guard taking on specific roles. In cases where debris poses a potential oil or hazardous substance threat to the environment, the Coast Guard, as the Federal On Scene Coordinator (FOSC) for the Coastal Zone, will lead removal actions under the National Contingency Plan (NCP).

The Coast Guard may also develop and issue Broadcast Notice to Mariners (BNMs) to advise vessel traffic of potential hazards to navigation. In certain circumstances the Coast Guard may destroy or sink a hazard to navigation.

For instance, in late March the Coast Guard began tracking the derelict 200-foot unmanned and unlit Japanese fishing vessel RYOU-UN MARU after it was sighted by the Canadian Coast Guard. The Coast Guard deployed data marker buoys and conducted daily over-flights to monitor the position of the vessel. The Coast Guard then conveyed this information to mariners via BNMs transmitted over marine VHF radio.

When the vessel entered the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone on Saturday March 31, 2012, it was drifting west northwest in a location approximately 170 nautical miles southwest of Sitka, Alaska. The drift of the vessel brought it toward the approaches to Dixon Entrance, Alaska, a waterway where approximately 800 transits, including those of tank vessels, occurred in the preceding six months. The vessel's condition, location, and projected track, made it a serious threat to the safe navigation of other vessels in the vicinity. The Coast Guard consulted with the Department of State to ensure that any action would not have adverse international implications and ultimately deemed the RYOU-UN MARU a hazard to navigation. As a result, the Coast Guard Cutter ANACAPA successfully sank the RYOU-UN MARU at sea on April 5, 2012 to ensure the safety of navigation.

Additionally, the Coast Guard frequently works with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) to manage debris that creates a hazard to navigation in navigable channels or waterways. ACOE is the lead Federal Agency for all obstructions determined to be in federally maintained navigable channels and waterways. All other types of simple debris that do not pose a pollution threat or a hazard to navigation would be managed by state, local, or tribal jurisdictions.

Coast Guard resources and personnel may also be requested by NOAA to support NOAA's mission of debris monitoring and tracking. For example, the Coast Guard has conducted several over flights with NOAA representatives onboard to help identify debris in locations such as Montague Island, Alaska.

Operational Planning and Coordination

At the national level, NOAA has overall lead for tracking and reporting on the status and trajectory of marine debris. The Coast Guard further supports NOAA by participating in bi-weekly interagency conference calls, hosted by NOAA, to provide strategic interagency coordination, awareness, and information sharing.

At the regional and local levels, the operational commanders of Coast Guard Pacific Area, the Thirteenth District in the Pacific Northwest, the Fourteenth District in Hawaii, and the Seventeenth District in Alaska are actively engaged with other Federal, state, local and tribal partners to provide a common operational picture and alignment of responsibilities. The Coast Guard is also currently working with NOAA to develop a public outreach and awareness communication strategy. As part of this outreach effort, the Coast Guard and NOAA recently coordinated 10 interagency public meetings in Oregon to provide information on agency authorities and capabilities in regards to tsunami debris. Last month, the Coast Guard also participated in an interagency Marine Debris Workshop in Washington State to begin drafting a Washington State Japan Tsunami Marine Debris Contingency Plan. According to NOAA, similar meetings are planned for Hawaii and California in the coming months.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard continues to work closely with NOAA to address the potential impacts of marine debris and respond to substantial pollution threats or hazards to navigation. As with any preparedness activity, these efforts will continue to require a whole of community and a unity of effort across all levels of government.