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Press Release

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Wide-Scale, Complex Marine Debris Removal Effort Underway *State, Feds, Businesses, and Non-Profits Partner on International Collaboration*

(JUNEAU, AK) – A major shoreline cleanup project underway in Alaska will remove hundreds of tons of marine debris that was generated by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan and subsequently deposited along the coastline of the United States and Canada.

The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) — along with other government agencies, non-profit organizations, and commercial partners — is launching a month-long helicopter and barge operation to remove marine debris on Alaska's and Canada's most harsh and remote shorelines. Funded in large part by a goodwill gift from the Government of Japan, the State of Alaska has contracted with Gulf of Alaska Keeper, an Alaskan non-profit organization, to coordinate this project. The operation will use helicopters to sling several thousand super sacks and bundles of marine debris from dozens of remote sites onto a 300-foot barge, the *Dioskouroi* (leased by Waste Management, Inc.). The barge will be towed by the tug *M/V Billie H* from Kodiak through the Gulf of Alaska and then south to British Columbia, picking up debris caches along the way. The debris will be offloaded in Seattle for sorting and recycling, with remaining debris sent by train to a final disposal site in Oregon. The barge is scheduled to arrive in Kodiak on July 15, 2015.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

On March 11, 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake hit 230 miles northeast of Tokyo, resulting in a massive 30-foot tsunami. Nearly 16,000 lives were confirmed lost in the disaster, with thousands more left missing and injured, and much of the area's coastal communities and infrastructure was destroyed. Despite these unparalleled losses, in 2012 the Government of

Japan generously donated \$5 million to the United States to support cleanup efforts in the five Pacific states, and \$1 million to British Columbia. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) administers these funds in the United States and makes awards based on the specific needs of each state. Due to the large volume of debris, the thousands of miles of impacted coastline, and the complexity of industrial-scale response and removal operations, Alaska has so far received \$2.5 million of the \$5 million gift.

Since 2012, as the lead agency for Alaska, DEC has used a combination of funds from the Government of Japan, the State of Alaska, and other resources to contract with Airborne Technologies, Inc. (ATI) for an aerial coastline survey to assess the extent of the marine debris problem. In 2012, and 2014-2015, ATI flew the Alaska coastline from Cape Muzon in southeast Alaska to the Kodiak Archipelago and Bristol Bay, mapping the coastline and documenting debris density, movement, and composition. Over 15,000 geo-referenced images captured through this effort have been used to determine where to focus clean-up efforts.

Funds from Japan, grants from the Alaska State Legislature and the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council (EVOSTC), and other NOAA awards have supported numerous marine debris cleanup projects throughout the state since 2012. Debris from many of the early cleanup projects was successfully disposed of in Alaska landfills. However, in 2014 a combination of difficult weather and reduced ability of Alaska landfills to accept marine debris forced some cleanup crews to consolidate debris in super sacks and bundles and cache it safely on shorelines for removal in 2015.

This project is a collaborative effort which would never have been possible without the unprecedented generosity of the Government of Japan. Critical state and federal partners include DEC, EVOSTC, NOAA Marine Debris Program, the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service Chugach National Forest, Bureau of Land Management, and the United States Coast Guard. Nonprofit organizations including Gulf of Alaska Keeper, Island Trails Network, Resurrection Bay Conservation Alliance, Alaska SeaLife Center, and local business Blue Fox Bay Lodge have done most of the on-the-ground shoreline collection for this removal effort. Other non-profits such as the National Park Foundation and local businesses such as Port Graham Corporation helped to fund or support this effort. Commercial partners include Waste Management, Inc., Alpine Air Alaska, Inc., Alaska Airlines, and Boyer Towing, Inc. Recycling efforts are being coordinated by Parley for the Oceans, Bionic Yarn, and CDL Recycle.

MARINE DEBRIS IN ALASKA

Tsunami generated marine debris consists of everything that was washed away from Japan's urban coastal communities: building fragments, polystyrene foam, aquaculture and fishing buoys, polyurethane, docks, shipping containers, vessels, fuel tanks, drums, lines and nets, household items, and plastics. Since the tsunami, significant increases of debris of suspected Japanese origin have been noted on coastlines from Kodiak Island through Prince William Sound and Southeast Alaska.

Although there are no reliable estimates as to how much tsunami debris will ultimately reach Alaska, debris is expected to continue arriving for several years. "Debris on our shores is not a new problem in Alaska, but we have definitely seen an increase in quantities and a change in composition as debris from the tsunami continues to impact our coastline," said Elaine Busse Floyd, Director of DEC's Division of Environmental Health. "It has far-reaching effects on our environment, fish and wildlife, commercial, recreational, and cultural interests, especially since debris migrates inland over time with weather and tidal influences. This is even more reason to clean up our shorelines sooner rather than later."

KODIAK KICKOFF EVENT

An open house and a press availability is scheduled for Thursday, July 16 at 2:00pm at the Koniag, Inc. meeting facility at 194 Alimaq Drive in Kodiak, Alaska.

Speakers including DEC Commissioner Larry Hartig and representatives from the marine debris community in Alaska will talk about the effects of marine debris and provide additional information about what is being done to address the issue in Alaska. Representative samples of marine debris, photos of past cleanup efforts, a map of the planned barge route and debris locations, and a filled super sack will be on hand to illustrate the details of this operation and the scope of debris that continues to impact Alaska's coastline. The public is invited to attend.

For more information on marine debris cleanup efforts in Alaska, visit <http://dec.alaska.gov/eh/marine-debris/>.

The airlift/barge project can be tracked on social media using the hashtag #BargeWatch2015.

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