

Statement by the Honorable Dan Sullivan on: “Marine Debris and Wildlife: Impacts, Sources, and Solutions.” Subcommittee on Fisheries Water, and Wildlife; May 17, 2016

Good morning. The purpose of this hearing is to examine impacts and sources of marine debris on wildlife populations and potential solutions to this issue.

For coastal states, particularly those on the West Coast, the prevalence of marine debris on our shores is a chronic issue. Marine debris results from a number of man-made sources including derelict fishing gear, poor solid waste management practices, major storm events, and everyday litter.

In March 2011, a large earthquake struck off the Japanese coast, causing a large tsunami and tragically killing or displacing tens of thousands of people. While much of the media attention rightly focused on this tragic outcome, and the related situation with the Fukushima nuclear power plant, another less reported story was unravelling.

The 2011 tsunami washed millions of tons of debris into the Pacific Ocean, most of which eventually made its way to the Pacific Northwest of the United States. In some of the most extreme examples, a 185 ton dock washed up on Washington's Olympic Coast, the U.S. Coast Guard was forced to sink a floating ghost ship off Alaska before it struck the shore, and a motorcycle washed ashore Western Canada.

Today, Alaska is still dealing with the impacts of this event, and one of our witnesses here today will discuss his organization's efforts and experiences while cleaning this mess. In addition to the organization represented here today, there are others in Alaska conducting important response and research work, such as the Sitka Sound Science Center. And in another example, the Alaska Pinniped Entanglement Group is a coalition of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island, and NOAA focused on freeing tangled marine mammals from marine debris.

NOAA has identified a number of hotspots, where debris accumulate in large quantities due to ocean currents and other factors. Mostly in the Pacific, these so-called “garbage patches” have been known by scientists for years. Yet, what is less known is the impacts of these debris on marine and land based birds, mammals, and other species and their ecosystems. I am hopeful that today's hearing will shed some additional light on these effects and identify research gaps.

While the problem of marine debris is apparent, there are no clear answers on how best to solve it.

The United States has taken major steps to address issues here at home, and the plastics industry has proactively pursued ways to address debris in the marine environment. In Alaska and other coastal states, most debris comes from foreign sources, as evidenced by the volume of materials collected on our shores bearing labels written in Chinese, Russian, Filipino, Indonesian, and many other foreign languages.

As a result of the tsunami, in 2012, the Japanese government gifted \$5 million to the U.S. government to assist in debris removal and response efforts. This one time infusion of funds supplemented NOAA's modest annual congressional appropriation for the Marine Debris Program. The authorization for the Marine Debris Program has lapsed, but fortunately Congress has continued to fund this important work.

But, beyond funding response and clean-up work, how can the United States help encourage better sanitation management practices in developing countries, and what innovative ideas exist to solve these problems? These are some of the questions that I hope this hearing will help answer.

I'm pleased to have a distinguished and diverse panel of witnesses here this morning. Thank you all for being here.