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State marine debris cleanup efforts boast successful field season

(ANCHORAGE, AK)– The 2014 field season for the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) marine debris clean-up project has resulted in the collection of 176 tons of inert (non-hazardous) marine debris from shorelines across Alaska. The cleanup was funded by a donation from the Government of Japan to the United States and a gift to the State of a collection of over 400 private donations from Japanese citizens. An additional 91 tons of debris were collected through projects funded by a 2013 legislative appropriation, as well as funds from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council. The 267 total tons of debris is cached and ready for removal and disposal next spring.

DEC is the lead state agency coordinating clean-up efforts for the increased volumes of marine debris washing ashore in Alaska as a result of the 2011 Japanese tsunami. The agency manages Alaska's share of the clean-up funds donated to the United States by the Government of Japan.

In Alaska, these funds are used to support aerial surveys and tsunami marine debris cleanup operations on shorelines throughout the state. In 2014, DEC issued contracts to target the most affected beaches along the Gulf of Alaska and Southeast Alaska. Partnerships forged with the non-profit organizations Gulf of Alaska Keeper, Island Trails Network, Airborne Technologies Inc., Alaska Marine Stewardship Foundation, and Sitka Sound Science Center resulted in collection and removal of marine debris.

“These groups and their volunteers are to be applauded for their dedication and hard work. They were essential in our being able to use the funds so effectively, and despite the remote and sometimes harsh conditions, the work was completed safely with no injuries,” said Elaine Busse Floyd, DEC environmental health director. “It’s a big job, and is on-going as debris from the tsunami continues to wash ashore.”

The collaborative effort between NOAA, the State of Alaska, the non-governmental organizations, and the other funders also created a number of jobs and provided volunteer opportunities.

The work started in 2014 will be built upon next year, pending an additional grant from NOAA, using some of the remaining funding from the Government of Japan.

While much of the initial tsunami debris sank immediately off the coast of Japan, it was estimated that as much as 1.5 million tons of debris might move across the Pacific Ocean with the winds and the currents. Tsunami-generated debris began arriving on the coasts of the United States and Canada in late 2011. While it is expected that debris will continue to arrive in Alaska for several years, there are no reliable estimates as to how much tsunami debris will ultimately reach Alaska's shore.

The composition of the marine debris that is being removed includes inert materials such as plastic bottles, jugs, polystyrene foam, building materials, ropes and buoys. Monitoring by federal and state agencies confirms that tsunami marine debris is not radioactive.

For more information on the State's efforts, visit DEC's marine debris website: <http://dec.alaska.gov/eh/marine-debris/>.

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