Japan Earthquake & Tsunami:
Marine Debris FAQ's and Public Education Talking Points
March 7, 2012

When will the debris from the tsunami in Japan reach the U.S.?

- Current computer models predict that some debris could pass near or wash ashore in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as early as this winter and approach the West Coast of the United States in 2013.

Why are pieces of debris washing up now if scientists think it will take years?

- Marine debris is an everyday problem and it washes upon our coasts from Asia all of the time. It is unclear if the accounts of this debris being related to the tsunami are true. Items need to be closely inspected before we can determine, if possible, that they were washed into the sea by the tsunami.

Is there really 25 million tons of debris coming this way?

- It's a misconception that there is 20-25 million tons of debris in the water from the tsunami. The Japanese government originally estimated that the tsunami and earthquake generated 25 million tons of debris total, but there is no confirmed estimate of how much actually went into the water. There is also little information on what types of debris (boats vs. trash vs. appliances) went into the water.

Is there a debris field?

- The debris is no longer in a "debris field." Immediately after the event, satellite sensors focused on the area around Japan picked up tsunami debris, but by April 14, the debris had dispersed to a point where the sensors could no longer detect it. Rather, there are many items scattered across a large area of the North Pacific.

Is the debris radioactive?

- There is consensus among scientists that this is highly unlikely, for several reasons:
    - The vast majority of the debris was many miles away from the reactor, precluding any contact with the radioactive leak.
    - The leak of contaminated water from the reactor into the sea started days to weeks after the debris was washed out to sea. By the time the radioactive water leak developed, the debris was already in the ocean, miles away from the reactor.
    - Vessels coming into the United States from Japan were monitored for radiation, and readings were below the level of concern.

Can some of the debris contain hazardous materials?

- As is always true with marine debris, it is possible that that drums or containers with hazardous materials will wash ashore. No one should touch these items or try to remove them. Instead, report it to the local fire department or county environmental or public health department. Local agencies already have protocols in place to safely deal with such materials.

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What about navigational safety hazards created by the tsunami debris?

- If you have questions about navigation safety, please contact the **U.S. Coast Guard** and view the U.S. Department of Transportation's **MARAD advisory**.

How can we begin monitoring the shore or report sightings of tsunami debris?

- Debris from other sources is washing up on our shore all the time. If unusual types or a large amount of material washes up and it appears it might be related to the tsunami, it should be reported to the NOAA Marine Debris Program at DisasterDebris@noaa.gov. Avoid picking up unusual debris that you are not well equipped and trained to handle.

Why isn't this considered an emergency yet?

- It's hard to take emergency actions when there's so little information about what we're responding to – remember: it's possible that most of the debris will break up, sink, or get caught up in existing garbage patches.

What is being done to prepare for the arrival of the debris?

- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) Region 9, California Environmental Protection Agency and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) continue to collaborate with Federal and State partners, including Cal EMA, as well as external stakeholders to assess and monitor the movement of the Japan tsunami marine debris. We're working on creating contingency plans that will address scenarios ranging from no debris to high levels of debris.

For current information go to these websites (which are also the sources for these talking points):

- **NOAA** Marine Debris Program: http://marinedebris.noaa.gov/info/japanfaqs.html#2
- **US EPA** Region 9 Marine Debris homepage: http://www.epa.gov/region9/marine-debris/
  Sign up to receive a monthly email bulletin:
  https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USAEPA/subscriber/new?topic_id=USAEPA_431

Additional information can be found here:

- California Tsunami Program (California Geological Survey and CalEMA): www.tsunami.ca.gov
- NOAA's National Weather Service: http://www.tsunami.gov/
- NOAA's Center for Tsunami Research: http://nctr.pmel.noaa.gov/
- NOAA's National Weather Service "Tsunami: The Great Waves":
  http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/brochures/tsunami.htm
- US Geological Survey "Surving a Tsunami": http://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/c1187/
- CA Seismic Safety Commission: http://www.seismic.ca.gov/tsunami.html
- California Environmental Protection Agency: http://www.calepa.ca.gov/Disaster/default.htm
- US EPA Region 9: http://www.epa.gov/aboutepa/region9.html