

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4705

December 7, 2012

Coastal Marine Resource Committee Members and summit attendees,

Thank you for the opportunity to participate by letter in addition to the esteemed panel that has gathered to discuss a very important issue impacting the coastlines of Washington state—debris from the Japanese tsunami.

Our deepest sympathies go to the Japanese people and communities that have been, and continue to be, affected by one of the worst natural disasters and human tragedies in history. Our communities are now also being impacted by the March 2011 catastrophe as components of the estimated 1.5 million tons of debris that was swept into the ocean begin to wash up on our shores at an alarming pace. In recent months, a 66-foot, 165-ton dock washed ashore near Newport, Oregon, a 22-foot boat came ashore near Ilwaco, Washington, and an empty, 150-foot Japanese squid boat appeared off the coast of Alaska and was sunk by the Coast Guard when it became a serious hazard to navigation.

The arrival of these large and dangerous objects follows months of a continual stream of smaller debris ranging from Styrofoam, buoys and floats, light bulbs, and even pieces of homes. The situation is expected to only get worse. Scientists estimate debris will continue to wash up on our shores, peaking in Washington state as early as this Winter. Not only does this pose a significant safety risk, but in Washington state, our coastal economy supports 165,000 jobs and \$10.8 billion dollars in economic activity. It is imperative that we take decisive, coordinated action.

In March, along with Senator Begich of Alaska, I sent a letter to President Obama calling for a solid action plan to respond to tsunami debris to protect coastal economies, including increased support for the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Marine Debris Program which was due to have a 25% cut in the fiscal year 2013 budget, and allocation of Emergency Research Funds under the National Science Foundation's RAPID program.

At a Senate Commerce Committee hearing earlier this year in March, I called on NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco to prioritize research and modeling efforts. Additionally, at a Senate Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard in May, I called on NOAA to develop a comprehensive debris response plan. In addition, I highlighted clear gaps in research such as cost estimates, impacts on commercially valuable fish species, and unclear debris trajectory models.

Because of my concerns for the clear lack of federal coordination and response, I have introduced an amendment to S.1119, the Trash Free Seas Act which called on an existing NOAA, EPA, and Coast Guard committee to prioritize, research and develop response plans to protect our coasts from the unique threat of severe marine debris events, such as the tsunami

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debris. Coordinating cleanup and response for a severe marine debris event requires foresight, planning, research, and established interagency action plans. After passing the Senate Commerce committee, the bill was included in the Coast Guard Authorization Bill which passed the House this week. I am actively championing this legislation in the Senate and we are optimistic for passage.

We have had more than a year to prepare for incoming debris, yet still little is known about the scale of the threat. The federal government has failed to invoke an adequate level of response to this urgent tsunami debris threat and has yet to dedicate adequate resources or create a solid coordinated action plan for tsunami debris response.

There are several avenues with good potential for improved federal response. It is important to explore partnerships with private sector entities that are interested in helping to get "boots on the beach" to begin the process of cleaning up. Using private sector funds with an appropriate level of federal matching would leverage taxpayer investment into larger amounts of cleanup activities.

We also need federal agencies to partner with the affected states, Tribes, and localities to prepare for the impending arrival of the debris. To date, the clean-up burden has fallen largely to our states and often small coastal communities who can ill afford to cover this national obligation, which is unacceptable.

Thank you for your efforts on the ground to establish local response, planning, and collaboration. I look forward to continuing to work with Washington state, the Administration, tribal governments and local governments to find proactive ways we can prepare to address and mitigate this tsunami debris and to protect our coastal communities, economies, and the ecosystems they rely on.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Maria Cantwell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and a long, sweeping underline.

Maria Cantwell
U.S. Senator