

SAM FARR  
17<sup>TH</sup> DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA

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**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-0517**

1125 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-0517  
(202) 225-2861

100 WEST ALISAL  
SALINAS, CA 93901  
(831) 424-2229

701 OCEAN STREET  
ROOM 318  
SANTA CRUZ, CA 95060  
(831) 429-1976

[www.farr.house.gov](http://www.farr.house.gov)

**TESTIMONY OF**

**THE HONORABLE SAM FARR**  
**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**THE 17<sup>TH</sup> DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA**

**BEFORE THE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE**  
**ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS, AND INSULAR AFFAIRS**

**DECEMBER 15, 2011**

Thank you Chairman Fleming and Ranking Member Sablan for holding a hearing on the Marine Debris Act Reauthorization Amendments of 2011 (H.R. 1171), which I introduced in March. I sincerely appreciate the bill's bipartisan support from 31 cosponsors, including 8 Members of this Subcommittee on both sides of the aisle.

Mr. Chairman, our beaches and oceans have turned into landfills. Prime tourist destinations, which were once pristine coastal environments, are now littered with garbage. According to the National Academy of the Sciences, we dump more than 14 billion pounds of trash into the ocean every year. This trash, which is formally referred to as marine debris, spans everything from derelict fishing gear that has been lost at sea, to large kitchen appliances, to single-use bottles and plastic bags.

The issue of marine debris is critical now more than ever due to the tragic tsunami that occurred off of the coast of Japan in March 2011. According to recent estimates, between 5 and 20 million tons of debris resulting from the tsunami is floating across the Pacific Ocean. Models developed by the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to track and predict the movement of this debris suggest that it could wash up on the shores of the Northwest Hawaiian Islands by this winter and the west coast of the United States by 2013.

Marine debris is not just an eyesore. It has enormous economic impacts. For instance, in the summers of 1988 and 1989, New Jersey and New York experienced beach closures when medical marine debris washed ashore. Estimates suggest that the total loss in tourism revenues was as much as \$3.6 billion.

Another stark example of marine debris' economic impacts is derelict fishing gear. Studies show that over \$250 million in marketable U.S. lobster is lost each year in derelict fishing gear. Additionally, in the Puget Sound, a single derelict gillnet will catch and kill 4,368 crabs over its lifetime. In a time where our fishermen are already facing economic challenges, losses of this magnitude are simply unacceptable.

Marine debris also causes economic harm to boaters. Submerged debris poses significant navigational hazards and results in up to \$792 million per year in damages to vessels resulting from boating accidents.

The only way to protect these industries and ocean-users and their contributions to the national economy is to reduce the amount of marine debris in the environment and to prevent it from getting there in the first place. In 2006, Congress first recognized the significance of this issue and took decisive action to elevate marine debris as a national concern by passing the original Marine Debris Research, Prevention, and Reduction Act of 2006. This legislation was introduced in the Senate by Senators Daniel Inouye and Ted Stevens and later passed in the House by voice vote under Republican leadership. The law signed by President Bush strengthened federal efforts to address this serious problem by establishing the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Marine Debris Program.

Now it is time to reauthorize this law, which is the purpose of H.R.1171, the Marine Debris Act Reauthorization Amendments of 2011. H.R.1171 would ensure that the NOAA Marine Debris Program continues to address marine debris and its impacts on the economy, navigation safety, and the marine environment. This legislation continues the Interagency Marine Debris Coordinating Committee (IMDCC), an interagency partnership led by NOAA that is intended to avoid duplicative efforts. As the lead marine debris agency, NOAA sets research priorities, leads derelict gear removal activities, establishes public private partnerships, and develops non-regulatory outreach strategies to prevent marine debris. This work also requires that NOAA coordinate with and serve as a resource to regional, state, local, territorial, and tribal entities

The reauthorization also amends the original law in order to allow NOAA to more comprehensively address the issue of marine debris. First, the reauthorization includes a formal definition of marine debris, formulated in consultation with NOAA and the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), as mandated by the original law. As noted in NOAA's submitted testimony, the desired definition has been updated since the introduction of this Act, and I fully support amending the definition to be consistent with what NOAA and USCG have since agreed on. Reauthorization also requires NOAA to improve efforts to reduce and prevent land-based sources of marine debris, where 80% of debris in the ocean originates. Next, H.R.1171 calls upon NOAA develop products and tools that will be available to the public, such as protocols for monitoring marine debris. Finally, the language suggests that NOAA cooperate with the international community, which has and will be critical in dealing with Japan's tsunami debris.

Since its inception in 2006, the NOAA Marine Debris Program has demonstrated its ability to successfully minimize the consequences of marine debris to our national economy through countless examples. The tourism industry, for instance, benefits from the annual International Coastal Cleanup, which leaves beaches trash free and more desirable as vacation destinations. This event, which is organized by the Ocean Conservancy and partially funded by the NOAA Marine Debris Program, is the world's largest single day marine debris cleanup event. In 2010, the United States had over 240,000 volunteers from every territory and all 50 states who cleaned up 4.5 million pounds of trash from our coastlines. In Louisiana alone, volunteers

removed over 7,500 pounds of debris from the beaches, while in Florida's 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional district, over 1,857 people participated.

Funding for the International Cleanup comes from a portion of the Program's budget that is dedicated to grants. From 2005-2009, the NOAA Marine Debris Program provided grant funding for 86 projects with only \$6.3 million. As a result of the minimum 50% matching requirement that was put in place by the original law, these funds have leveraged an additional \$7.9 million in non-Federal funds. H.R.1171 maintains this matching requirement and ensures that projects like the International Coastal Cleanup continue in order to safeguard the coastal tourism economy.

The NOAA Marine Debris Program also promotes the fishing economy. Derelict fishing gear can have devastating effects on the value of fisheries. When traps, nets, pots, and other gear are lost at sea, they continue to catch and kill valuable, harvestable species in a process called ghost fishing. Although the Marine Debris Program has already made significant strides in working with the fishing community to address and recover derelict fishing gear, the Reauthorization specifies that NOAA must "develop effective non-regulatory measures and incentives to cooperatively reduce the volume of lost and discarded fishing gear and aid in its recovery." These efforts are becoming increasingly critical, as a recent economic study found that for each derelict net that is retrieved from the marine environment, the fishing industry saves \$6,285 due to reduced mortality of target species. This demonstrates that ignoring the problem will simply cost the fishing industry money.

In the Chesapeake Bay, research shows that there could be as many as 120,000 derelict traps that are actively ghost fishing. For this reason, the NOAA Marine Debris Program has undertaken an effort to partner with fishermen, academia, and the private sector to reduce the prevalence of derelict gear to ensure that valuable seafood isn't lost. Through a NOAA partnership with the Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences, fishermen in the Chesapeake Bay region are paid to find and retrieve derelict traps, and thus far, over 34,000 derelict pots have been removed. In sum, this project has reduced the economic impacts of derelict gear on the fishing industry, while creating jobs for watermen.

In a separate effort to address derelict fishing gear, NOAA has engaged in a public-private partnership with two companies, Covanta Energy, of New Jersey and who will be testifying at the hearing, and Schnitzer Steel Industries, of Hawaii. In this partnership called "Fishing for Energy," fishing gear recycling bins have been installed in 25 ports across the country. These bins provide a no-cost solution to fishermen for disposal of old fishing gear. This alternative to costly landfill disposal also provides fishermen with a voluntary incentive to retrieve any derelict gear they might come across while out on the water. Covanta Energy and Schnitzer Steel then take the gear and recycle it in order to produce electricity. This public-private partnership provides another example of how the existing law has allowed NOAA to find efficient and effective solutions to the problem of marine debris, and the reauthorization will allow for these partnerships to be strengthened.

Finally, NOAA is working to make boating a safer activity by reducing navigational hazards caused by marine debris. For example, following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the Gulf of

Mexico, the increased abundance of submerged marine debris posed a significant navigational hazard to boaters and fishermen. To minimize this risk, NOAA partnered with USCG, the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, and several private nautical mapping companies to survey over 1,500 square nautical miles along the Gulf Coast. Through this effort, over 7,000 submerged items were located and mapped in offshore fishing and shrimping grounds. The fishermen and boaters were then provided maps and information and outreach materials in order to help them reduce collisions, thus reducing the number of incidents that would require additional Federal response and resources.

Navigational safety may also become a major issue in the Pacific as a result of Japan's tsunami. To prepare for this, the NOAA Marine Debris Program has provided information to the U.S. Department of Transportation for a Maritime Advisory concerning Japan tsunami debris. The advisory urges U.S.-flagged ships and mariners to be vigilant while transiting the North Pacific between Japan and the West Coast of the United States. The advisory includes information on potential types of debris and provides instructions for reporting significant sightings of floating debris. In addition, NOAA convened a meeting with IMDCC representatives in June 2011 in order to determine the role of each federal agency in a potential tsunami debris response. Representatives of the IMDCC have agreed to help NOAA in pursuing methods for assessing and tracking tsunami debris and have established a Japan tsunami workgroup.

The examples provided here have resulted in strong support from the private sector and the fishing industry for the Reauthorization. Private sector and fishing industry entities including the American Chemistry Council, the Chamber of Shipping of America, and the New Jersey Coast Anglers Association have submitted support letters for H.R.1171, which are attached to the end of this testimony.

As the tsunami debris approaches the United States, Congress must take action to prepare by passing H.R.1171. Existing law has allowed for the formation of successful partnerships both within the Federal government and between the Federal government and the private sector. These partnerships have successfully leveraged the resources and capacity of NOAA, enabling the Marine Debris Program to make significant strides in tackling the pervasive challenge of marine debris, with very limited resources. In fact, the NOAA Marine Debris Program truly serves as a model for how successful and cost-effective federal programs should operate. We must act now to ensure that this Program and its partnerships are not only maintained, but strengthened, and H.R. 1171 is the necessary vehicle to ensure our country can address the impacts of ocean trash on marine ecosystems, coastal economies, and navigation safety. Thank you again for this hearing, and I look forward to working with this subcommittee to move this legislation forward.