

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
TIMOTHY R. E. KEENEY
DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR OCEANS AND ATMOSPHERE
NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**

**LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON S. 362, THE
“MARINE DEBRIS RESEARCH, PREVENTION, AND REDUCTION ACT”**

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND OCEANS
AND THE
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COAST GUARD AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Mr. Chairmen, and members of both Subcommittees, thank you for this opportunity to testify on S.362, the “Marine Debris Research, Prevention, and Reduction Act.” My name is Tim Keeney, and I am the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), within the Department of Commerce. Today, in addition to commenting directly on S. 362, I would like to outline the impacts of marine debris on our Nation’s natural resources, and provide information on strategies NOAA is pursuing in order to address this important issue.

Currently, there is no formal legal definition for marine debris. We support the creation of a formal definition for marine debris through the Interagency Marine Debris Coordinating Committee. To date, NOAA has used the following working definition: “Marine debris is any man-made object discarded, disposed of, or abandoned that enters the coastal or marine environment. It may enter directly from a vessel, aircraft, platform, or other man-made structure, or indirectly when washed out to sea via rivers, streams and storm drains.” Marine debris may enter the environment directly, such as from a ship, or indirectly when washed out to sea via rivers, streams and storm drains. Natural events, such as a tsunami or hurricane, can also result in a severe amount of debris entering our coastal waters. The amount of marine debris that we will find in the Gulf as a result of Hurricane Katrina alone will be staggering.

COMMENTS ON S. 362, THE “MARINE DEBRIS RESEARCH, PREVENTION, AND REDUCTION ACT”

NOAA supports the purposes of the Marine Debris Research, Prevention and Reduction Act to elevate the importance of marine debris as a national concern and to strengthen federal efforts addressing this serious problem. The Administration has recently established the Interagency Marine Debris Coordinating Committee, pursuant to the U.S. Ocean Action Plan. We support improved coordination on this issue within our agency as well as between various agencies. Partnerships are a critical component to the success of current marine debris activities, including the development of new technologies in gear detection and removal, gear disposal methods, and outreach and education programs. Accordingly, we support a matching-fund grants program for non-federal entities engaged in marine debris mitigation activities. We are encouraged that the House of Representatives is considering S. 362, a bill that would elevate the importance of this issue, and maintain and strengthen our ability to address marine debris and its impact on our marine resources. Sustained support for a coordinated marine debris program is an important step towards the overall reduction of marine debris in our coastal and marine ecosystems. For additional information we refer you to the Department of Commerce’s views letter on S. 362, which was transmitted on September 1, 2005.

OVERVIEW OF MARINE DEBRIS ISSUES

Many forms of debris are found in our coastal and ocean waters. Plastics are a persistent form of debris. As society has developed new uses for plastics, the variety and quantity of plastic items found in the marine environment has increased dramatically. Glass, metal, and rubber are similar to plastic in that they are long-lasting, ubiquitous and commonly used in a wide range of products. While these materials can be worn away and broken into smaller and smaller fragments, generally they do not completely biodegrade. This causes major problems in coastal watersheds and oceans as these materials come into contact with wildlife, people, boats, and fishing nets. Thousands of aquatic animals are injured, killed or have their habitat impacted by marine debris each year. Coastal communities spend substantial resources removing marine debris from their shorelines.

One of the most biologically harmful forms of marine debris is derelict fishing gear (DFG). “Derelict fishing gear” is defined as nets, lines, pots, and other recreational or commercial fishing equipment that has been lost, abandoned, or discarded in the marine environment. DFG is an extremely dangerous form of debris worldwide. In Hawaii, DFG has been identified as the most serious human-related threat to the fragile coral reefs of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, where it abrades and enshrouds corals. Because much of today’s fishing gear is made of plastic, it can persist for decades in the ocean, and continue to catch and entangle marine animals long after its original fishing purpose has expired. Entanglement of marine animals in these nets can kill, injure, and impair the mobility of marine animals. Between 1982 and 2000, over 200 endangered Hawaiian monk seals have been entangled in DFG.

Commercial and recreational boaters also encounter DFG. This gear can become entangled in and potentially damage boat propellers, which can become a safety issue when vessels are disabled. Derelict fishing gear is also an issue for our naval vessels and submarines. I had an opportunity to accompany Navy divers on a DFG removal training exercise held in June in Washington State's Puget Sound and Northwest Straits region. This project, funded by NOAA and other federal and state agencies, brought together Washington Department of Natural Resources divers, who are experts in DFG removal, with Navy divers to train them on safe removal of DFG from navigational waterways and ports. Through projects like these, NOAA has already begun working with our partners to identify, map, assess, and remove DFG in various regions around the country.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES ADDRESSING MARINE DEBRIS

NOAA has been working to address the impacts of marine debris for decades. From 1985 to 1996, NOAA administered the Marine Entanglement Research Program, a marine debris research and management program created in response to growing public concern over the impacts of marine debris on wildlife. Since then, NOAA has continued to support marine debris clean-up and prevention activities. For example, NOAA is working with the U.S. Coast Guard and the Department of Interior on a major effort in debris assessment and removal in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands; we are also using satellite and aerial remote sensing to locate and track oceanographic features likely to accumulate floating marine debris; and supporting our external partners in the development and testing of protocols for the safe removal of derelict fishing gear from coastal waters.

To organize, strengthen, and increase the visibility of marine debris efforts within the agency, Congress appropriated funds in FY 2005 directing NOAA to reestablish a centralized marine debris program. Through this effort, we are coordinating activities to identify, remove, reduce, and prevent the occurrence of marine debris.

OBJECTIVE AND STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS MARINE DEBRIS ISSUES

To reduce marine debris and minimize its impact on marine and coastal resources, habitats, and commerce, NOAA intends to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Identify, monitor, and evaluate the adverse impacts of persistent marine debris upon the marine environment, living marine resources, and marine navigation;
2. Design and implement educational materials and programs to inform industry and the public of the problems caused by persistent marine debris and of the range of available solutions;
3. Minimize the amount of marine debris entering the oceans from all sources by developing procedures and programs and, where necessary, recommending

- regulations to prevent the loss or disposal of persistent debris into the marine, coastal, urban and upland environments; and
4. Reduce the amount of marine debris in the environment through removal and prevention projects and programs.

We have identified six strategies, listed below, to accomplish these four objectives.

1. Source Identification, Monitoring, Research, and Information Sharing Activities

While the problem of marine debris has been around for decades, we know very little about its impacts on the environment and marine species. Additional research and monitoring is needed to assess the impacts of marine debris, to assure that appropriate measures are taken to mitigate the impact. NOAA supports research and monitoring activities to determine more precisely the impacts of persistent marine debris on human, fish and wildlife populations. These activities include, for example, locating and removing marine debris from the Main Hawaiian Islands; locating a marine debris port reception feasibility project in Honolulu; and identifying and mapping derelict fishing gear in Chesapeake Bay. The information collected from these activities can be shared with partners in the field and incorporated into educational outreach for the public.

2. Coordinated Prevention, Mitigation and Removal Activities

Many federal, state, and local governments and non-governmental organizations are actively working to develop solutions to marine debris issues. These solutions range from educational programs to coastal clean-ups. NOAA will work with these partners to develop and test cost-effective methods of detection, tracking, and removal of debris in the ocean and coastal waters, leading to an operational procedure for finding and removing hazardous marine debris. An example of this activity is the current removal of debris from the Aleutian Islands, Alaska.

3. Interagency Coordination and Support

Interagency coordination is essential for the efficient implementation of strategies to targeting marine debris issues nationwide. In December 2004, the U.S. Ocean Action Plan announced the establishment of the Interagency Marine Debris Coordinating Committee. This Committee is an interagency body responsible for coordinating a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approach to mitigating the impacts of marine debris.

4. Reduction through Regional, Community and Industry-Motivated Activities and Grants

In addition to interagency issue-specific coordination, NOAA is partnering with the private sector and academia. Our university, non-governmental, and corporate partners provide new ideas, financial resources, and environmental education opportunities that expand NOAA's visibility and capabilities. For example, NOAA is working with partners in the Northwest Straits to remove derelict fishing gear and train divers in gear

removal, and has also provided federal funding opportunities through the Community-based Grants Program and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. These relationships allow NOAA to gain a better understanding of industry concerns and foster partnerships with industry, state and local governments, and non-governmental organizations.

5. International Efforts

Marine debris knows no political boundaries. Marine debris is a global problem and our domestic agenda is linked with that of our international partners in efforts to reduce the impacts of marine debris. For example, NOAA is currently collaborating with the United Nations Environment Programme to provide technical assistance to countries in the Wider Caribbean Region interested in developing National Plans of Action to reduce land-based sources of pollution, including marine debris.

6. Education and Outreach

Education and outreach are critical to reducing marine debris. Reducing marine debris requires boaters, fishermen, other industries and the general public to have the knowledge and training to voluntarily change their behavior. NOAA is currently working with state partners to educate boaters and volunteers in Alabama and Mississippi on the hazards associated with marine debris. Locally, we are initiating the Watershed Explorers Program in Washington, DC, a hands-on program to provide students with an opportunity to protect the Anacostia River and increase their understanding of the local environments and marine debris. Working with partners, NOAA will develop comprehensive educational materials on problems caused by marine debris and actions people can take to reduce the impacts of marine debris on the environment.

CONCLUSION

NOAA will continue to pursue on-the-ground research, prevention and reduction of marine debris nationwide. Thank you again for this opportunity to discuss S. 362 and the benefits of a centralized marine debris program.