

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 30, 2012

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to bring your attention to the urgent threat tsunami-generated debris poses to coastal economies on the West Coast and Hawaii and urge your Administration take several actions that will better prepare our coastal communities and protect vulnerable ecosystems.

The recent discovery of a 150 foot fishing vessel just 120 nautical miles off the coast of British Columbia should be a wake-up call that debris from last year's tragic Japanese tsunami could soon be reaching coastlines up and down the West Coast. It is estimated that at its current speed and trajectory this derelict vessel could make landfall in approximately 50 days. However, this vessel is likely only the leading edge of up to 100,000 tons of debris floating towards Hawaii, Alaska, Washington, Oregon, and California. While the debris appears to be spreading out over many miles in the open ocean, and traveling at different speeds and directions, one thing is clear: United States coastlines – and our coastal economies – may be at risk.

Our deepest sympathies go to the communities who have been, and continue to be, affected by last March's Japanese earthquake and tsunami. This event will be remembered as one of the worst natural disasters and human tragedies in history. Japan has made huge strides towards recovery in these communities, though we continue to see ongoing impacts in Japan, and beyond. Across the Pacific, we must now prepare our own coastal communities for the remnants of entire Japanese communities that the tsunami swept into our shared ocean.

Tsunami debris has the potential to negatively impact international shipping and other maritime transportation, damage our fishing and shellfish industries, harm our robust tourism industry, and impact fragile and pristine shorelines. In Washington State, the coastal economy supports 165,000 jobs and \$10.8 billion dollars in economic activity. Alaska has thousands of miles of coastlines with rich natural resources.

We have had more than a year to prepare for the incoming debris, yet little is known about the scale of the threat. We are deeply concerned that government agencies are not taking this risk seriously. The federal government has yet to dedicate adequate resources or create a solid coordinated action plan for tsunami debris response. We also need federal agencies to partner with the affected states, tribes, and localities to prepare for the impending arrival of the debris. To this end, we ask that your Administration take the following steps:

**Mobilize Emergency Research Funds:** The National Science Foundation RAPID program enables funding for fast-response research to fuel emerging needs, like tsunami debris. RAPID funds should be used to give our scientists the tools they need to determine critical knowledge gaps such as the trajectory, volume, composition, and potential impact of the tsunami debris. Access to better science can help coastal communities understand the likely impact of tsunami debris to their shores. We ask that you dedicate RAPID funds so that we can quickly identify critical knowledge gaps and determine the potential impact of the coming tsunami debris. These RAPID funds have been utilized in the aftermath of the Deep Water Horizon Oil Spill and the Japanese tsunami and earthquake.

**Ensure America's Scientists Get The Data They Need:** We believe we should be mobilizing existing data sets to measure the composition, magnitude, and trajectory of marine debris. Using existing data will save taxpayer dollars, and allow our scientists to begin work on characterizing this threat right away. The Medea program currently permits appropriately credentialed researchers access to classified satellite imagery in support of climate change research. We ask your Administration expand the program to include tsunami debris.

In addition, we urge you to allow the U.S. Navy to provide access to appropriately credentialed researchers data from routine surface, air, and undersea patrols over the tsunami debris field. Such information would be an invaluable and unmatched resource that could identify wayward vessels and other debris pieces before they enter our sensitive waterways. The derelict vessel currently threatening the Pacific Northwest was only discovered by a civilian patrol aircraft; we can and must do better.

**Increase Support for the Existing NOAA Debris Program:** Your fiscal year 2013 budget request reduces the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Marine Debris Program by 25 percent. We believe that even under normal circumstances such a reduction would be ill advised given the program's proven success tackling normal marine debris. But such a cut makes even less sense given the looming threat of tsunami-generated trash.

Furthermore, the Administration's budget proposed moving the debris program from the Office of Response and Restoration (which handles oil spills and other response needs for NOAA) to the habitat program at the fisheries service. This move seems counterproductive when we must call on our debris experts to continue to meet their statutory obligations. As the tsunami debris approaches the Hawaiian Islands this year and the U.S. mainland next year, we hope you will support Congressional efforts to restore this critical funding.

Thank you for your attention to this matter of utmost concern to the West Coast. We look forward to working with you and your Administration on finding proactive ways we can prepare to address and mitigate this looming threat to our coastal communities, the resources they rely on, and the ecosystems belonging to every American.

Sincerely,



Maria Cantwell  
U.S. Senator



Mark Begich  
U.S. Senator

CC: Secretary Leon Panetta, Department of Defense  
CC: Secretary Janet Napolitano, Department of Homeland Security  
CC: Secretary John Bryson, Department of Commerce  
CC: Secretary Hilary Clinton, Department of State  
CC: Secretary Ken Salazar, Department of the Interior  
CC: Commandant Robert Papp, United States Coast Guard  
CC: Secretary Ray Mabus, United States Navy