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NOAA sends team of scientists to evaluate, assess and map marine debris

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Lt. Ben LaCour, Operations Coordinator for the NOAA mission speaking at a public meeting at the Office of Samoan Affairs on Tues. Dec. 1, 2009, regarding the team's mission in the territory. Lt. LaCour is also in charge of logistics, boat fueling, SCUBA tank readiness, and radio communications for the group, who will be here for two weeks assessing and mapping marine debris.

[Courtesy Photo]

An advance team of marine biologists, oceanographers, and scientific support personnel arrived on island Sunday for a two week project leading to the removal of debris from coastal waters following the tsunami of late September. In response to requests by ASG, two programs within NOS (Coral Reef Conservation Program and Marine Debris Program) pooled funds to support a preliminary assessment of tsunami-generated marine debris and emergency coral restoration for American Samoa.

According to team leader Kris McElwee, "a strategic and systematic survey and assessment of the level and impact of marine debris was deemed necessary, both to demonstrate the extent of support needed for recovery efforts and to help prioritize potential future removal operations."

On Tuesday, December 1, the team visited the Office of Samoan Affairs where they spoke to OSA officials, along with a gathering of village pulenu'u and members of the general public who were interested in hearing about the project from members of the team. Led by McElwee, the group hail from Hawaii and Washington state, and all work under the auspices of NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

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Lt. Ben LaCour, Operations Coordinator for the mission, spoke briefly to the assembly, who were anxious to know when debris removal would get underway. LaCour, a uniformed officer in NOAA Corps, a small unit of non-military uniformed service people within NOAA, said he wanted members of the public to know that there was hope for something beyond an assessment being done at this time.

However, it was made clear during a question/answer period, that the primary goal for this group is a systematic survey of coastal waters which have been littered with tsunami debris, with the end product being a map which may be utilized by divers in their quest to remove marine debris and restore coral reefs.

Asked one resident at the meeting, "As you do an assessment of the island, who will you be working with?" McElwee responded that the group is working jointly with DMWR (Dept of Marine and Wildlife Resources) and the Coral Reef Advisory Group housed at DOC, as well as officials with Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary.

McElwee noted the team “will concentrate on villages which these local groups have determined are the most affected by debris in the areas around their coral reefs.”

A pulenu'u (*village mayor*) asked about any restrictions which the group would have while they are working out the damage assessment, to which the response was that there would be “no restrictions, except that we ask when the boats are out there, to please be mindful of the fact that they will have divers in tow.”

Marine debris, as noted on the NOAA website, is a global problem affecting everything from the environment to the economy; from fishing and navigation to human health and safety; from the tiniest coral polyps to giant blue whales. It comes in many forms, “from a cigarette butt to a 4,000-pound derelict fishing net.” It threatens oceans and coasts; marine mammals, fish, and seabirds; human health and safety; and navigation, and NOAA has been tasked as the lead agency in the federal government to assist in the removal of marine debris, particularly where coral reefs are affected, no matter what the cause.

Following the tsunami of September 2009, the coastal waters of the territory have been littered with everything from roofing (*api*) to vehicles, from tires to furniture. The powerful wave which left trucks in trees and pulled houses from their foundations also acted as a powerful suction which pulled everything in its wake out to sea. Boats, cars, appliances, tools — the equipment and machinery that make up modern life — were dragged out into the coastal waters on that fateful day.

MARINE DEBRIS REMOVAL RELATIVELY NEW

Although the oceans have always been the repository of natural coastal debris, as well as man-made debris such as sunken vessels, it was generally bio-degradable in nature. Today, it is the intensely durable, non-bio-degradable material (*plastics, metals, styrofoam, etc.*) which pose serious problems for coral reefs and marine wildlife.

It was after the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita along the Gulf Coast in 2005 that extensive amounts of such debris were deposited, posing a hazard to vessel traffic and fishing grounds alike.

So severe was the problem of submerged debris following Katrina and Rita that Congress appropriated funds to survey areas potentially affected by the debris, tasking NOAA's Office of Coast Survey and Office of Response and Restoration to conduct the surveys, compile and disseminate data in an effective and useable format, conduct marine debris risk assessments, and carry out other outreach activities specific to this project.

One of the key elements of this project, according to the website, www.marinedebris.noaa.gov, is to ensure the states' (*and territories*) fishing communities and public are made aware of survey planning, progress and findings.

To that end, the first NOAA team has arrived and met with their local partners. Tonight, the NOAA dive teams will arrive and begin the systematic survey whose end product will be a map identifying areas where coastal reef resources have been deeply impacted.

As a trustee of natural resources, it is one of NOAA's responsibilities to conduct this survey, which will lead ultimately to the removal of marine debris in the territory's coastal waters.

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