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Jun 29, 2012 - 12:01 AM AKST

State secures emergency funding to assess tsunami debris

BOB TKACZ, FOR THE JOURNAL



The State of Alaska is releasing emergency funds to assess the scope of debris washing up on its coastline from the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan. Debris from the disaster, such as the drum of unknown liquid seen at left or the vast amounts of foam Styrofoam and plastic seen above, is arriving in Alaska much sooner than federal agency models predicted.

Courtesy of Chris Pallister, Gulf of Alaska Keeper

Using emergency procurement authority, the Department of Environmental Conservation issued a request for proposals on June 22 for an aerial photo survey of the Gulf of Alaska shoreline for use to plan the state's immediate efforts to clean-up debris from the March 2011 Japanese tsunami.

June 28 was the due date for bids, capped at \$200,000, for the low altitude survey, including high definition photography and an analysis, "to substantiate the concentration of Japanese tsunami marine debris," on Gulf of Alaska, or GOA, beaches.

Work must be finished by August, but bidders get 25 points under the 100-points evaluation criteria for completion in mid-July and DEC Commissioner Larry Hartig said Aug. 1 is the target "drop dead date" for a plan of work that can done in this year likely to start with outer islands of Prince William Sound and other known "collector beaches." Hartig is organizing state planning in coordination with tsunami-driven and regular federal and nongovernmental organization work.

"The working assumption is that we would be targeting hazmats and things like Styrofoam that are ecologically significant," Hartig said June 20.

Hazardous materials, "ecologically significant" materials that are chemically inert but may pose a risk to fish and wildlife and "everything else" are Hartig's working categories of expected debris, but the categorization masks the complex problem facing planning agencies.

Toxics, including petroleum products and industrial chemicals, comprised about 1 percent of pre-tsunami flotsam and jetsam arriving here, according to DEC, but no one knows how much more the Japanese catastrophe will bring. Rat poison and containers of unidentified liquids have been found.

Invasive species like those that reached an Oregon beach on a section of a Japanese dock pose yet another threat that an aerial survey can miss. The Department of Fish and Game is charged with response planning for them and ecologically significant materials.

"We really are a little bit stuck on what to do about invasive species. Big things like docks have invasives on them but small things do, too," said Doug Vincent-Lang, a special assistant to ADFG Commissioner Cora Campbell, on June 22.

Nets, floats and other "traditional" fisheries debris posing entanglement threats to marine mammals are also being found.

"We need to figure out what kinds of stuff is getting on the beaches and what volumes we're talking

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about,” Vincent-Lang said.

Beside the difficulty of planning a cleanup without knowing what, how much of it or when it may arrive, past projections on debris trajectory have been wrong. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s original “current driven” model failed to include the historical northbound winds along the U.S. West Coast.

More debris is hitting Alaskan beaches sooner than expected according to the manager of the largest pre-tsunami beach cleanup program in the state.



“We’re one of the largest marine debris activities around. Our resources will barely make a dent in this. Just about everyone is viewing it that way,” said Merrick Burden, executive director of the Marine Conservation Alliance, on June 20.

Burden developed a transport-based debris categorization to help MCA planning. His first group is wind driven trash like Styrofoam. His second group is material subject to wind and currents and the third is junk that is mostly submerged and driven primarily by currents.

“The content is different. Where they end up is different,” Burden said.

Wind-driven debris began arriving most of a year earlier than expected.

“The second and third we’re not going to know for a couple of months,” he said.

MCA spends about \$300,000 annually on beach cleanup.

“We are getting further and further behind the curve,” Burden said.

He suggested \$20 million could be required to clean up tsunami debris and said the watchdog group Gulf of Alaska Keepers “is thinking \$40 million.”

Chris Pallister, GOA Keepers executive director, was on a cleanup cruise and could not be reached for comment.

Emergency state funding for this season has been secured, according to Hartig. He and Burden both expect about a month of cleanup work before fall weather makes trips to outer Prince William Sound islands and other traditional collection beaches too dangerous.

Next year’s cleanup costs will be worked into standard budget planning for fiscal year 2014, but Hartig noted that out-year response raises state policy questions that the debate already developing in Congress indicates will be expensive.

In a May letter to President Barack Obama, Sen. Mark Begich called for “at least \$45 million” for a “boots-on-the-ground” cleanup of a “slow-motion environmental disaster.”

Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire announced June 18 that her Military Department Emergency Management Division would start cleanup work that should ultimately become a federal project.

Hartig said Alaska remote beaches and higher cleanup costs pose different questions for planners than those to the south.

“The question being, in my mind, is whether the sheer volume of it reaches a breaking point where it’s ecologically significant, or just otherwise unacceptable to public or the land manager that we’d want to go out and collect or move all or part of it,” Hartig said. “One could go out and spend millions and millions of dollars cleaning up the inert material from Alaska’s beaches, go out ten or 20 years from now and have a similar pile sitting out there.”

*This article appears in the **July Issue 1 2012** issue of Alaska Journal of Commerce*

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