

TESTIMONY OF
THE HONORABLE SAM FARR
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
THE 17TH DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

BEFORE THE TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE SUBCOMMITTEE
ON COAST GUARD AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION

JULY 26, 2011

Thank you Chairman LoBiondo and Ranking Member Larsen for holding a hearing on the Marine Debris Act Reauthorization Amendments of 2011 (H.R. 1171), which I introduced in March. This bill currently has bipartisan support from 24 cosponsors, and I appreciate the willingness of the Committee to draw awareness to the critical and challenging issue of marine debris.

Mr. Chairman, our oceans are in trouble. The marine environment is in the worst shape in the history of mankind, and we, as humans, have treated the oceans as a dumping ground for our waste. Over 14 billion pounds of trash end up in the ocean and soiling our beaches every year, and this trash, which is formally referred to as marine debris, includes everything from single-use plastic shopping bags, to derelict fishing gear, bottle caps, cigarette butts, plastic bottles, lighters, and more. Ultimately, this trash hampers tourism and harms commercial fisheries, having devastating impacts on the U.S. economy.

Every year, over 77.8 million Americans from all over the country visit a beach, and this tourism is a driver for economic growth. Many businesses rely solely on tourism for their success, and an increase in the prevalence of marine debris can have long-lasting economic impacts. For example, 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. While our country has made significant progress in preventing events such as this, keeping our beaches clean still requires significant resources. In the city of Long Beach, California, \$17 million is spent each year in an effort to maintain tourism by keeping the beaches trash free.

In addition to these economic impacts, this trash is taking a toll on the marine environment. Marine debris impacts 267 marine species through ingestion or entanglement, and estimates suggest that up to 100,000 marine mammals are killed each year by marine debris. Marine debris also poses an ongoing threat to endangered species and recovery efforts. For example, in the last 20 years, there have been over 200 observed incidents of Hawaiian monk seal entanglement in marine debris. For a species with less than 1,000 individuals remaining, the threat posed by marine debris could be the deciding factor for the future of this species.

In 2006, Congress recognized the pervasive problem of marine debris by passing the original Marine Debris Research, Prevention, and Reduction Act of 2006. This law established programs within the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the United States Coast Guard (USCG) to address the problem of marine debris. Specifically, the law laid the foundation for partnerships between USCG, NOAA, and other federal agencies with the creation of the Interagency Marine Debris Coordinating Committee (IMDCC). The IMDCC facilitates joint-agency efforts to increase awareness and improve compliance amongst various stakeholders, including the maritime industry and boaters, in order to reduce and prevent marine debris. The interagency coordination and information sharing resulting from the existing law has helped both NOAA and USCG to be more effective and efficient in their missions, including USCG's mandate to enforce MARPOL Annex V, an international agreement which prohibits dumping of plastics at sea. Additionally, existing law has helped ensure coordination of marine debris activities between Federal agencies, ultimately preventing duplication of efforts. Agencies in the IMDCC are now more easily able to coordinate research priorities, monitoring techniques, education programs, and regulatory actions, allowing USCG and NOAA to do more with limited resources.

For example, the joint partnership between NOAA and USCG resulted in a widely successful marine debris mapping project in the Gulf of Mexico. Every year, marine debris causes up to \$792 million in damages to commercial and recreational vessels. 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, USCG partnered with NOAA, the Gulf of Mexico states, 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 USCG response and resources. This initiative clearly exemplifies that this multi-agency approach provided a more comprehensive, successful solution than what could have been accomplished by a single agency working alone.

In addition to interagency partnerships, NOAA and USCG have been particularly successful in forming public-private partnerships with local communities, academic institutions, the private sector, and the fishing industry to find wide-ranging solutions to prevent and reduce marine debris. These partnerships are critical to leveraging private funds and result in more resourceful and successful federal programs. The reauthorization explicitly calls for the further establishment of public-private partnerships that will assist in the implementation of marine prevention and reduction initiatives.

Public-private partnerships have been particularly successful in addressing and reducing the impacts of derelict fishing gear. Derelict fishing gear, which is gear either lost, or disposed of, at sea, can devastate the value of marine fisheries, as it continues to catch and kill target species in a process called ghost fishing. It is estimated 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, and

a public-private partnership called "Fishing for Energy" was formed to help minimize these economic losses.

The "Fishing for Energy" partnership originated in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands as a partnership between NOAA, USCG, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and two private companies called Schnitzer Steel and Covanta Energy. In this partnership, NOAA and USCG work to remove derelict fishing gear from the marine environment, and then the gear is returned to Schnitzer Steel and Covanta Energy, where the gear is recycled to produce electricity. In the Northwest Hawaiian Islands, over 1.4 million pounds of derelict gear has been recycled, producing enough electricity to power 260 homes for an entire year. Additionally, the "Fishing for Energy" partnership has installed recycling bins in 25 ports across the country, which have accumulated over 1 million pounds of old fishing gear. These recycling bins provide fishermen an alternative to costly landfill disposal of old fishing gear, as well as an incentive to retrieve any derelict gear they might come across while on the water. This public-private multi-agency partnership provides another example of how the existing law has successfully addressed the problem of marine debris, and the reauthorization will allow for these partnerships to be strengthened.

In addition to partnerships that increase efficiency, Federal resources are further amplified as existing law requires that all NOAA Marine Debris Program grant funding is matched by at least 50%. From 2005-2009, NOAA's program has funded 86 projects with only \$6.3 million, and these funds have leveraged an additional \$7.9 million in non-Federal funds. One project of noteworthy significance that is partially funded through the existing law is the annual International Coastal Cleanup. This is the world's largest single day marine debris cleanup event, and in 2010, the United States had over 240,000 volunteers who cleaned up 4.5 million pounds of trash from our coastlines and marine environment. This bottom up effort engages local communities all across the country, and the vast participation in this cleanup event indicates that public support for marine debris efforts is widespread. The reauthorization encourages these efforts to continue and maintains the matching requirement in order to augment Federal funds.

In summary, existing law has allowed for the formation of successful partnerships both within the Federal government and with the Federal government and the private sector. These partnerships have successfully leveraged the resources and capacity of USCG and NOAA, enabling these agencies to make significant strides in tackling the pervasive challenge of marine debris, with very limited resources. We must act now to ensure that these partnerships are not only maintained, but strengthened, and H.R. 1171 is the necessary vehicle to achieve this. It is through these partnerships that our country can most efficiently and effectively 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.