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Congress passes key ocean debris measure

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Congress has unanimously approved legislation that would commit \$12 million annually through 2010 to attack the flotillas of trash that drift on our seas and wash up on our reefs and beaches.

In consolidating federal ocean trash-control efforts and emphasizing the source of the floating garbage, the measure attacks a key area of weakness in the current marine debris approach, said Chris Woolaway, the longtime coordinator of the Get the Drift and Bag It program in Hawai'i, which is a part of the Ocean Conservancy's International Coastal Cleanup.

"We need to get at the stuff before it becomes marine debris," Woolaway said.

The Marine Debris Research and Reduction Act, introduced last year by Hawai'i Sen. Daniel Inouye, provides \$12 million annually in federal funding for the effort through 2010, \$10 million to NOAA and \$2 million to the Coast Guard.

The issue is of special importance to Hawai'i because of the vast volumes of garbage that collect in a great oceanic dumpyard to the north and east of the Islands, and which periodically surge onto the Hawaiian coastlines on the winds and currents.

The reefs of the new Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument are notorious for the marine debris they snag.

The islands lie slightly to the north of the main Hawaiian Islands, and are nearer the currents and debris fields that contain great rafts of discarded netting, rope, plastic containers, fishing gear and much more. Cleanup crews have come across marine life, including sea turtle pups, trapped in netting during efforts to remove the material.

"Marine debris such as discarded fishing lines and nets is responsible for killing or injuring thousands of marine mammals, fish and birds every year," said Ocean Conservancy president Vikki Spruill, in an e-mailed statement.

"This legislation helps prevent marine-life entanglement by addressing some of the major sources of dangerous marine debris. It will expand the existing body of science, contribute to our understanding of its sources, and lead to more effective prevention."

Since 1996, a total of 484 tons of debris has been removed from coral reefs in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, Inouye said in a news release

"In Hawai'i, we are able to see the effect of marine debris more clearly than most because of the convergence caused by the North Pacific Tropical High," Inouye said.

The bill had bipartisan sponsorship, and Alaska Republican Sen. Ted Stevens joined Democrat Inouye in spearheading its progress through the Senate. The measure was approved unanimously in both the House and Senate. The bill still requires the approval of President Bush.

In creating a multiyear program, the bill would allow the federal government to dedicate resources to the problem, rather than borrowing temporarily from different agencies to address it piecemeal.



Divers remove tangled netting and other material off the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

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It creates a marine debris program in NOAA with three goals: the prevention, study and cleanup of marine debris. Additionally, the Coast Guard's funding will help promote enforcement of marine pollution laws. The agencies are being urged to cooperate with foreign governments on the issue.

The measure also calls for a federal clearinghouse of marine debris information, to include a global database on where marine debris is found and what its sources are.

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