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Fishermen hauling in 'ghost nets'

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Local fishermen have collected and brought home more than 3 tons of "ghost fishing nets" this year as part of a new project to keep remote reefs and ocean areas free of debris and to keep the garbage out of Hawai'i landfills.

The nets were collected, shredded and then burned at the H-POWER, or Honolulu Project of Waste Energy Recovery, site in an all-volunteer effort that is increasing at a time when another successful federally funded debris-collection program in the remote Northwestern Hawaiian Islands has come to an end, state and federal officials said.

Officials are optimistic that the program, which started in January, and others like it starting up around the country and the world can be expanded if a \$15 million marine debris bill pending in the U.S. Congress is passed. The bill, introduced by Sen. Daniel K. Inouye, passed the Senate last year but has stalled in the House of Representatives.

The rogue nets, either abandoned or broken loose from commercial fishing operations throughout the world, are considered a huge environmental threat in the Pacific. They can ensnare and kill dolphins, monk seals and other wildlife; can get entangled in fishing boat propellers, stalling work for days; and can become lodged on pristine coral reefs, with a "bulldozing" effect that ultimately destroys the reef and kills everything living on it.

Since 1997, divers working on a federally funded salvage vessel have removed more than 500 tons of nets from the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands at an estimated cost of \$25,000 per ton and brought them back to O'ahu, where starting in 2002 they were shredded and burned rather than taken to the landfill. This year, however, federal officials have switched their marine debris focus to the main Hawaiian Islands, starting with O'ahu.

With the \$3 million per year funding for the federally funded cleanups in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands now dried up, local fishermen are picking up the slack by pulling derelict nets from the ocean and bringing them back to Honolulu. The fishermen do not collect nets entangled on the reef.

"Getting the fishermen engaged has always been seen as an important part of solving the problem," said consultant Chris Woolaway, who coordinates multiagency marine debris cleanup efforts in the Pacific. "It's in their own best interest to have this derelict fishing gear cleaned up."

EFFORTS IMITATED

The Hawai'i net recycling programs have captured attention around the world and spurred similar efforts, said Howard Wiig, institutional energy analyst for the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism. The only similar U.S. program in the Pacific Northwest died for lack of voluntary support on land, Wiig said.



Discarded fishing nets are piled nearly 10 feet high at Schnitzer Steel Hawaii at Campbell Industrial Park. The company shreds the used nets, then sends them to the H-POWER plant, where the debris is turned into enough power for 42 homes a year.

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DEBRIS BY THE TON

Amount of marine debris collected in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands from 1996 to 2005, in tons:

1996-1997	4.9 *
1998	8.3
1999	28
2000	24.7
2001	67.7
2002	107
2003	118
2004	125
2005	58.4

* pilot effort

LEARN MORE

Federal marine debris control programs in the

In Japan, which has huge commercial fishing fleets that are often accused of contributing to the problem, a television network produced a 30-minute documentary on the Hawai'i efforts in 2004. Its government responded by putting tighter restrictions on boats that lose nets, Wiig said.

"What we pull out is only a drop in the bucket, but it's a start," said commercial fisherman Jim Cook. "We've always pulled aboard and brought back what we've been able to gather up, but now we have a place to put it when we come back to shore."

The new net recycling program is "going gangbusters," said Rene Mansho, a spokeswoman for Schnitzer Steel Hawaii, the local recycling company that is doing much of the work once the debris is brought to shore.

Schnitzer Steel, formerly Hawaii Metal Recycling, placed a 30-cubic-yard garbage bin with a locking lid at Pier 38, home of the commercial fishing fleet. When full, the company picks up the nets, tears them to pieces using its largest shredder — usually reserved for automobiles — and takes them to H-Power, where they are accepted without the usual \$80-per-ton tipping fee. The energy generated by the burned nets is enough to power 42 homes for a year, Wiig said.

Others are joining the effort. Marine debris from Hanauma Bay and the Windward O'ahu coastline also is being collected by Schnitzer Steel and burned at H-POWER, Mansho said.

"The focus in the Northwest Islands is now on maintenance, while collection efforts are stepping up across the state," Woolaway said.

NOT LOCAL PROBLEM

Ironically, most of the debris does not come from local fishermen, who use longlines rather than nets. Instead, it's an international problem that ends up in Hawai'i's backyard. A large cargo ship transiting the Pacific had to lay over in Hawai'i for several days last month after a net became entangled in its propellers, Woolaway said.

"There's never going to be a resolution to this problem unless we get the international fishing industry involved," she said.

That's one of the goals of the Marine Debris Research, Prevention and Reduction Act pending in the U.S. Congress. Key provisions of the bill, which provide \$15 million in funding to NOAA and the Coast Guard, include tracking the sources of the debris, reducing its loss and providing education and outreach programs, like the one at Pier 38.

"One of the first priorities is to get a handle on just how much stuff is out there and identify where it is coming from," Wiig said. "Then we could publicize on an international scale who is responsible for this and what they should be doing to help."

RECYCLING ABANDONED FISHING NETS

1. NETS ABANDONED



Large fishing nets from commercial trawling operations often are abandoned or lost at sea. Floating just below the surface, they can often entangle marine life, boat propellers or coral reefs, where they cause significant damage.

2. 'GHOST NETS' COLLECTED

Pacific:

marinedebris.noaa.gov

High Seas Debris Tracing
in the North Pacific:

www.highseasghost.net



Fishing vessels from Hawai'i sometimes collect floating "ghost nets." In other cases, the federal government pays divers to harvest the nets from the reef and bring them back to Hawai'i on specially chartered boats.

3. DUMPING GROUND



At Pier 38, an oversized collection bin is available for fishermen to deposit the nets.

4. HEAVY-DUTY SHREDDER



When the bin is full, it is hauled to Campbell Industrial Park, where the nets are shredded into tiny pieces by a machine generally used to shred abandoned automobiles.

5. EXTRA POWER



After shredding, the nets are taken to the H-POWER plant, where they are burned, generating enough electricity to power 42 Island homes for a year.

*Source: Advertiser research
Photos courtesy of Department of Business, Economic
Development and Tourism*

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