

Tsunami Debris on California's North Coast

The March 11, 2011 tsunami produced five million tons of debris. Most of the debris stayed near Japan, but NOAA estimates 1.5 million tons were caught in the Pacific Ocean currents and pushed by winds towards North America. Tsunami debris first arrived on the North Coast in 2013. All of the debris had dissipated by 2017.

What You Should Do

Tsunami Debris is no different than any other debris you may find on the beach. If you find debris that you think may be the result of the tsunami, ask yourself if it is hazardous or not:

1) Hazardous? Call 911

Oil or chemical drums, gas cans, propane tanks may be hazardous. If you think the debris poses a risk to health and safety, authorities need to know right away.

2) Not hazardous?

Post your observations at DisasterDebris@noaa.gov or call the U.S. Coast Guard National Response Center 1 – 800-424-8802

The overwhelming majority of the tsunami debris will not be dangerous. NOAA is interested in tracking tsunami debris that shows up along US coasts. If the item has identification, NOAA can help trace the item back to its owner.

If you don't know what it is, don't touch it. If it might be hazardous, call 911.

Frequently asked questions:

Is it radioactive? Debris from the Japan tsunami is no more likely to be radioactive than debris from any other source. The nuclear releases did not occur until long after the debris was washed offshore. The debris that has been found either on the Japan coast outside of the Fukushima area or elsewhere in the Pacific has not shown any radioactivity.

Will there be body parts? NOAA considers it extremely unlikely that there will be any human remains in the debris. It's been over a year since the tsunami and they will have long sunk.

What will the debris look like? Anything that floats such as Styrofoam, rubber, wood, plastic, boats, fishing supplies. There may be wires and metal connected to the floating material. It may include canisters, metal drums and other floatable containers. The debris is very dispersed and it is unlikely that it will arrive in large concentrations.

When will it arrive in Northern California? The bulk of the debris is likely to begin arriving in the spring of 2013. It will continue to arrive for several years.

Who will pay for the cleanup? Tsunami debris is no different than other debris on the beach or in the water. Local law enforcement will deal with hazardous debris. Beach clean up groups will likely encounter some tsunami debris along with ordinary beach detritus. Agencies and organizations with coastal jurisdiction will be responsible for debris along their coast. If a hazardous situation arises that is beyond the ability of local authorities to handle, assistance will be requested from the state.