

## United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 17, 2012

The Honorable Barack Obama  
President of the United States  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20050

Dear President Obama:

I continue to be frustrated with the lack of response to the massive wave of marine debris that resulted from the tsunami in Japan last year and which is already starting to foul our shores. The Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard, which I chair, held a hearing today regarding this matter, and I was hoping for an update that indicated that the Administration was taking this problem seriously and had a concrete plan to respond to what will be an environmental disaster. I was disappointed to learn that while the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has been modeling and tracking the problem, there wasn't an overall Administration-wide plan to actually clean up the debris.

In Alaska, we are already seeing the debris beginning to wash up on our beaches, and we know that this is just the beginning of a slow-motion environmental disaster that will unfold over the next several years. Unlike many disasters, which catch us by surprise, we have known the debris was coming since shortly after the tsunami. That is why I am surprised that the Administration has not formulated a coherent plan for clean up.

The administration's approach seems to be to simply leave the clean-up efforts to the states. While states should have a role, it is unacceptable for the federal government not to be playing a larger part. Therefore I call on the Administration to make at least \$45 million available for boots-on-the-ground clean-up efforts. These funds should be channeled not to government bureaucracy but rather to grants to local community groups to conduct clean-up efforts. Local groups have the expert knowledge of their beaches and coastline, and will be best suited to figure out exactly how to best clean up the debris. Grants for debris cleanups should be structured to leverage state and non-governmental

organization contributions in addition to federal monies—such a massive problem will require a whole of government solution.

I want to be clear that I see this as something that requires an Administration-level response. NOAA's marine debris program has been working well with extremely limited resources to provide scientific guidance on the scope of the problem. They should have an ongoing role in continuing to provide that scientific advice, but we cannot expect such a small program to singlehandedly respond to such a monumental crisis.

I look forward to working with you to help Alaskans and other impacted communities respond to this unfolding crisis. I look forward to your expedited response to this request.

Sincerely,



Mark Begich  
United States Senator