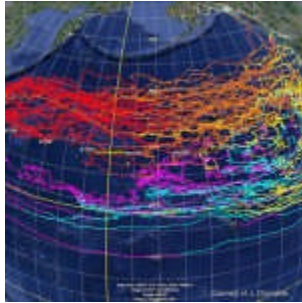


Japan's tsunami debris headed for California beaches

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Millions of tons of debris from Japan's devastating earthquake and tsunami in March are slowly making their way across the Pacific Ocean; scientists using computer models say the West Coast will be inundated with the stuff by 2013 or 2014. [[Mercury News.com](#)]

The debris, covering an area roughly the size of California, is moving east about 10 miles a day, with the leading edge approaching the international date line. It's expected to reach Midway and the Northwest Hawaiian Islands by next spring. Beaches in Washington, Oregon and California will likely be impacted the following year.

"Can you imagine San Francisco put through a shredder? A big grinder?" asked Curtis Ebbesmeyer, a Seattle oceanographer, who has studied marine debris for more than 20 years. "The area north of Tokyo was basically shredded. We are going to see boats, parts of homes, lots of plastic bottles, chair cushions, kids' toys, everything."

Much of the material will break up and sink but some will not, said Ebbesmeyer.

"I've seen pieces of wood float for 20 or 30 years," he said. "I have jeep tires with wheels that floated for 30 years. Things float a lot longer than you think."

The U.S. Navy's 7th Fleet reported and photographed the debris and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) tracked the refuse with satellite for about one month. Estimates on where and when the debris will make landfall are based on computer modeling, not actual tracking.

After April 14, as the debris spread over a wider area, it became more difficult to track or detect with the resolution of the satellites that NOAA uses.

Kris McElwee, Pacific Islands coordinator for NOAA's marine debris program in Hawaii, said it's difficult to tell at this point what has sunk and what still remains. He said it was highly unlikely that the refuse is radioactive because it had been swept out to sea before the nuclear plant meltdown in Fukushima.

Dead bodies in the refuse would decompose and sink before its arrival but there is the possibility of macabre discoveries such as feet in tennis shoes, which have washed ashore and been linked to missing persons who drowned.

Last week, representatives from the Coast Guard, NOAA, the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. State Department and other agencies met in Honolulu to share information and plan a strategy for tracking the debris.

University of Hawaii computer models show that after 2014, the debris will end up in the “North Pacific Garbage Patch,” a vast area roughly 1,000 miles west of California where plastic debris accumulates and breaks into tiny pieces over time.

“We’ve got a marine debris problem,” McElwee said. “This is a great opportunity to focus on it. But it is an ongoing problem. Whatever percent has been added by this tragedy, we need to all work together to solve it.”