State Task Force Continues to Monitor Dock on Olympic National Park Coastline

Local News

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FORKS, Wash. - A dock suspected to have been set adrift by the March 2011 Japanese tsunami remains beached on a remote and rugged section of the Olympic National Park coastline, state officials said today.State responders are developing a plan for dealing with the dock. No plan can be enacted until January, however, due to tides and daylight access. The Incident Command Post set up to address the dock stood down over the weekend and will resume operations when tides allow safe access to the dock.Meanwhile, as a precaution, a tracking buoy is attached to the dock. The buoy transmits its location twice daily via satellite. The location coordinates have not changed, indicating the dock has not moved since visited by a response team last week.A dangerously swollen stream combined with rough, high seas made reaching the dock difficult last week. A ground crew representing federal and state agencies had to make two attempts to reach the dock, but a small group of responders was able to reach the dock on Friday, Dec. 21. Working quickly during this month's last daytime low tide, the team thoroughly measured and inspected the dock, collected samples of the marine organisms clinging to it and placed the tracking beacon on it.The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is working with marine invasive species experts from Williams College in Connecticut, Oregon State University, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History to analyze samples they helped collect from the dock and to assess the risk they might pose to native Washington species. Nearly 30 species have been identified so far.

Allen Pleus, WDFW’s aquatic invasive species coordinator, said this evidence shows that Japanese coastal organisms continue to survive on marine debris, even after 20 months at sea. Pleus said most of the species on the Washington dock were present on a similar dock that came ashore on Agate Beach, Ore. in June, but none of the highly invasive species found on the Oregon structure were present on the Washington dock.More detailed analysis is ongoing and may require several months, Pleus said.Pleus praised the efforts of the National Park Service staff in assisting in the collection of samples. “We could not have done this important work without their help and their focus on safety,” he said.Responders also took samples to test for radioactivity. State Department of Health experts say it’s unlikely that radioactive contamination will be detected. “Last week’s operation was made possible through the great cooperation and support of many organizations, and that continued coordination will be important as we move forward in addressing this incident and the issue of tsunami debris overall,” said Terry Egan of the Washington Emergency Management Division. “It truly takes a multi-partner approach to address this issue. Each event will be unique and difficult to predict, and it’s important for our federal, tribal, state and local partners to continue working closely together.”The dock has not been officially confirmed as tsunami debris. Crews inspecting the dock looked for - but did not find - an identifying plaque like the one found on the Misawa dock that washed ashore on Agate Beach, Ore., but they located Japanese writing in one of the holds. Responders shared photos with the Japanese consulate and are waiting for confirmation from the government of Japan on whether the dock is tsunami debris.Pending further information about the risks associated with the dock, the section of the park between Goodman Creek and Jefferson Cove remains closed to all public entry.

Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary regulations prohibit disturbing wildlife by flying below 2,000 feet within one nautical mile of the coast or offshore islands. This includes the area where the dock washed ashore.Olympic National Park protects more than 70 miles of wild Pacific coast. Much of this coastline, including the dock’s location, was designated by Congress as Wilderness in 1988. Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary protects the 3,188 square miles of the marine environment seaward of the national park.The coastal section of Olympic National Park and Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary protect one of the richest and biologically diverse intertidal zones on the west coast of North America. Invasive species present a significant risk to the rich native coastal community.Marine debris is an ongoing problem with everyday impacts, especially around the Pacific, and natural disasters can make the problem worse. Anyone who encounters potentially hazardous debris should not touch or attempt to move it. Instead people should immediately call the state’s 1-855-WACOAST (1-855-922-6278) number and press “1” to reach an operator who can dispatch responders.Anyone sighting significant debris that may be from the tsunami is also asked to report it to DisasterDebris@noaa.gov.As of Dec. 27, NOAA has received approximately 1,450 official debris reports, of which 17 have been confirmed as definite tsunami debris. For the latest information on tsunami debris please visit http://marinedebris.noaa.gov/tsunamidebris and http://marinedebris.wa.gov.