

Reference:

May 30, 2012

I am writing to you in my capacity as the British Columbia (BC) Co-Chair of the Tsunami Debris Coordinating Committee to update you on planning for the anticipated arrival of this debris.

As you may know, on March 11, 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake struck Japan and the ensuing tsunami claimed more than 15,000 lives and damaged more than 100,000 buildings. The tsunami washed an estimated 5 million tonnes of debris into the sea. It is estimated that 70 per cent sank off the coast of Japan, leaving approximately 1.5 million tonnes floating in the Pacific Ocean. The debris is comprised of wood, plastics and other buoyant materials. Based on modelling of ocean currents, some quantity of that material is expected to wash up on the western coastline of North America over the next few years.

While the debris presents a significant planning challenge, our best scientific experts have determined it is unlikely any of the debris that washes up on BC shores will pose a significant environmental or public health risk. Nevertheless, senior governments along North America's west coast have begun joint planning to deal with debris, establish protocols for handling any items of significance that may wash ashore and develop contingency plans in the event of hazardous debris.

In British Columbia, we have established a Tsunami Debris Coordinating Committee (TDC), whose role is to bring together the various levels of government and key interest groups in a coordinated response to the debris. The TDC, which is meeting regularly, is co-chaired by me, representing the Province of BC, and Mr. Paul Kluckner, Regional Director General, Environment Canada, representing Canada.

The TDC oversees the activities of four subcommittees (Science and Monitoring, Debris Management Planning, Communications, and Intergovernmental Relations), which have been tasked with building the knowledge base, partnerships and plans necessary to respond to debris as it arrives. Membership is broad, and includes:

- BC Government representatives from the Ministries of Environment; Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations; Health; Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation; Community, Sport and Cultural Development; Transportation and Infrastructure; and Justice and Attorney General (Emergency Management BC).
- Federal representatives from Environment Canada, Public Safety Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Parks Canada, Canadian Coast Guard, and Transport Canada.
- The Union of BC Municipalities.
- The Vancouver Aquarium (organizer of the Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup) and Surfriders.

The TDC is currently exploring ways to engage with coastal First Nations and will work in the coming weeks to advance this goal.

Science and Monitoring Team

Responsible for advising the TDC on the amount, nature and timing of the arriving debris, this team works in close partnership with the U.S. National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Due to their extensive expertise in modelling related to marine debris, staff at NOAA have become engaged with this group and are included in its membership. In keeping with this partnership, an agreement has been established with NOAA to have Canadian debris sightings reported through NOAA's website at www.marinedebris.noaa.gov/info/japanfaqs.html.

BC Parks is in the process of establishing baseline debris monitoring sites in four locations; Parks Canada is prepared to assist on Gwaii Haanas and Pacific Rim National Park. BC Parks sites will use NOAA monitoring protocols to ensure there is a consistent data set across the Pacific Northwest. BC will also be collaborating with volunteer groups that use the NOAA monitoring protocol to broaden the scope of monitoring coverage in the province.

The radiation issue has been discussed and evaluated. There is a consensus among participants, including related experts, that there is no radiation threat. The Parks sampling sites may also be used for radioactivity testing to verify these expert opinions and to further our understanding.

A number of opportunities to partner with external stakeholders on tracking and reporting on debris are also being considered.

Debris Management Planning Team

Drawing on existing planning expertise available for emergency response, this committee has been tasked with reviewing existing planning for marine debris management and making recommendations to TDC regarding the form and content of a Tsunami Debris response plan, including protocols for safe handling of various wastes.

This group will also be responsible for recommending options for safe debris disposal. A roles and responsibilities document is currently being drafted that will seek to clarify authorities and accountabilities of the various partners. Once complete, the next step is to gather and communicate broadly the protocols for dealing with all types of debris. While many of these already exist, it is important they be scalable to ensure they can respond to a range of debris volume scenarios. Additional considerations for these protocols are:

- Establishing volunteer guidelines;
- Working in consultation with the Japanese consulate on sensitive debris finds;
- Considering the handling of hazardous materials; and
- Recognizing the need for early identification of waste storage and disposal capacity.

In general, we encourage everyone to dispose of beach debris in the nearest receptacle unless it is an item that appears to have personal or cultural significance, is large or is considered hazardous.

Communications Team

In support of public outreach on the tsunami debris issue, this group has established a BC Tsunami Debris website hosted by the Ministry of Environment where the TDC will provide regular updates (www.tsunamidebrisbc.ca).

As well, the following communication and outreach steps are being taken:

- Federal agencies (DFO, CCG) will be extending outreach to mariners as part of tracking/early warning of debris.
- Communication of response protocols will occur once they are available from the planning team.
- Consideration is also being given to other outreach activities, including looking at opportunities to engage with local communities.

Intergovernmental Relations

Consideration has been given to the interests of Japan should significant debris wash-up on the BC coast, and the Province has made agreements and commitments through the Pacific Coast Collaborative. These commitments centre on joint communications, volunteer protocols and information sharing.

Team members participate on regular bi-weekly updates from NOAA; these calls summarize the latest news related to tsunami debris in the Pacific Northwest.

No one agency or group has the sole responsibility or jurisdiction for responding to this challenge. It will require the resources and collaborative efforts of all. Local governments and First Nations will be key partners, both in managing any debris that washes ashore along BC's coast and in ensuring the community has accurate information. Volunteer groups, many with a long history of beach clean-up activities, will continue to be an important part of keeping our beaches clean. And the senior levels of government, through the TDC, will continue to foster this cooperation. We are intent on having formal plans together soon, well ahead of the arrival of the bulk of the debris.

In the meantime, we would like to draw your attention to the public information sheet (which I will send momentarily under separate cover) on what to do if you find tsunami debris and online resources where you can find up-to-date information on tsunami debris tracking and planning activities.

- A Japanese tsunami joint information centre website has been established by the Pacific Coast Collaborative to serve as a multi-agency public information and education site. This site includes a link to the NOAA website, which contains detailed modeling of the debris field and projections for when it may reach the west coast: www.disasterdebris.wordpress.com/.
- The BC Ministry of Environment information page provides local updates and answers common questions: www.tsunamidebrisbc.ca.

I encourage you to refer to the resources above and to check our website regularly for updates. If you would like to speak with me in my capacity as co-chair of the Tsunami Debris Coordination Committee, I can be reached at 250 387-1288 or at Jim.Standen@gov.bc.ca.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim Standen', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jim Standen
Co-Chair, Tsunami Debris Coordinating Committee
Assistant Deputy Minister, Environmental Protection Division
Ministry of Environment

cc: Paul Kluckner, Regional Director General, Environment Canada