Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 29, 2012

Admiral Robert J. Papp
Commandant, United States Coast Guard
2100 2nd Street SW, STOP 7328
Washington, D.C. 20593-7238

Dear Admiral Papp:

Thank you for your continued dedication to defending our nation's maritime interests. As Members of Congress from the West Coast, Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. territories in the Pacific we appreciate your work and know that your efforts are highly valued by our constituents.

We are writing about an important issue affecting our districts and the nation: the arrival of debris from the tsunami that struck Japan in March 2011. The earthquake and subsequent tsunami resulted not only in the tragic loss of too many lives; they also caused nearly 5 million tons of debris to be swept into the Pacific Ocean. More than a year later, large pieces of debris are appearing along the Pacific Coast of the United States, and are expected to be just the beginning of nearly 100,000 tons of debris to wash up along the shores of Hawaii, Alaska, Washington, Oregon and California.

On June 5th, a 66-foot dock from Misawa Japan washed ashore on Agate Beach near Newport, Oregon. The arrival of this dock emphasizes the seriousness of the issue of marine debris from the tsunami. Not only does this debris represent a significant threat to international shipping and other coastal industries, many invasive species have been discovered on this debris that, if left unaddressed, could represent an unprecedented threat to our coastal ecologies. In light of this serious threat we ask that you clarify your agency's role in responding to the arrival of tsunami debris on our coasts and we encourage close coordination with state and local entities as this response continues.

Earlier this year, an abandoned Japanese fishing boat, the Ryou-Un Mara, which had been washed out to sea by the tsunami, was scuttled by the Coast Guard 195 miles off the Alaskan Coast. According to reports, collaboration by the Coast Guard, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) quickly determined that sinking the ship at sea was the best option to protect coastal marine habitats and end any potential danger it might pose to other vessels. The arrival of the dock on the Oregon coast indicates that it was not determined to pose a similar threat. Given this inconsistency, please provide us with the criteria that the Coast Guard uses to determine when it will take decisive and effective action like that which was taken in the case of the Ryou-Un Mara.

Another concern that has been brought to our attention is the lack of information sharing by federal agencies with state and local government entities that are responsible for debris removal. We appreciate that the Coast Guard is asked to perform extraordinary work under difficult circumstances with limited resources, but we are concerned that local entities may not

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be notified before the arrival of potentially large pieces of debris. For this reason, we ask that you provide us with specific details about your procedure for reporting marine debris to local authorities and how you will ensure proper notification of potential threats caused by incoming hazards.

The earthquake and tsunami were unfortunate natural events beyond our control. The resulting debris presents a challenge of unprecedented scale to our overburdened state and local agencies. We are confident that the federal agencies with jurisdiction over marine debris issues, the state agencies responsible for maintaining the beaches and marine ecosystems, and the local governments and citizens who are committed to helping their communities can address this challenge. We want to work with you as this threat unfolds and we appreciate you providing us with the information necessary to do so.

We look forward to your response, and thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this request.

Sincerely,

SUZANNE BONAMICI
Member of Congress

JIM MCDERMOTT
Member of Congress

PETER DEFAZIO
Member of Congress

KURT SCHRADER
Member of Congress

SAM FARR
Member of Congress

COLLEEN HANABUSA
Member of Congress

GREG WALDEN
Member of Congress

JAIME HERRERA BEUTLER
Member of Congress

MIKE HONDA
Member of Congress

MAZIE HIRONO
Member of Congress

LOIS CAPPS
Member of Congress

ADAM SMITH
Member of Congress

JACKIE SPEIER
Member of Congress

DON YOUNG
Member of Congress

EARL BLUMENAUER
Member of Congress

JUDY CHU
Member of Congress

MIKE THOMPSON
Member of Congress

LYNN WOOLSEY
Member of Congress

GREGORIO KILILI CAMACHO SABLAN
Member of Congress

BRIAN BILBRAY
Member of Congress

PETE STARK
Member of Congress

MADELEINE BORDALLO
Member of Congress

NORM DICKS
Member of Congress

DAVE REICHERT
Member of Congress

JANICE HAHN
Member of Congress

BARBARA LEE
Member of Congress

ANNA ESHOO
Member of Congress

LAURA RICHARDSON
Member of Congress

CC: Secretary Janet Napolitano, Department of Homeland Security
CC: Secretary John Bryson, Department of Commerce
CC: Secretary Hilary Clinton, Department of State
CC: Secretary Ken Salazar, Department of the Interior
CC: Secretary Ray Mabus, United States Navy