

MARINE DEBRIS EMERGENCY ACT OF 2013

Goal: The Marine Debris Emergency Act would help communities that have been impacted by a “severe marine debris event” secure federal assistance. The bill would expedite the current grant award process made through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Marine Debris Program and give preference in these grants to communities facing severe debris events.

The arrival of this debris on the coast of the United States resulting from the tsunami that struck Japan in March 2011 continues to stretch the resources of state and local governments along with community groups that are assisting with response and removal. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has existing grant programs available to assist with debris removal, but the process for awarding these grants is slow and does not account for extreme circumstances. The bipartisan Marine Debris Emergency Act would speed the grant award process and give preference to applicants who are facing a severe marine debris event. No new grant funding is authorized or appropriated by this bill.

Severe Marine Debris Events—

Last year, when the U.S. Senate was considering legislation to reauthorize Coast Guard operations, Sen. Maria Cantwell included language to define a “severe marine debris event,” and also directed NOAA to determine whether the tsunami that struck Japan in 2011 constituted such an event. In February 2013, NOAA officially declared the tsunami debris as a severe marine debris event.

Preference for Certain Grant Applicants—

Under this legislation, the NOAA Administrator is required to give preference to projects that seek to address severe marine debris events when evaluating grant applications. This section explicitly includes projects that address marine debris that is likely to introduce invasive species into the United States.

Expedited Grant Award Process—

The Marine Debris Emergency Act would speed the NOAA grant award process for grants made through the Marine Debris Program. Currently, the Federal Funding Opportunity is announced in August, applications are due in November, and funds aren’t dispersed until June of the following year. This legislation would require the administrator to approve or deny a grant application, and award the money to the approved applicants, within 60 days of receiving an application.