

Hawaii will absorb brunt of Japan earthquake debris

An analysis by UH scientists shows that the vast swath of detritus will reach island shores in the next two years

Jim Borg, Honolulu Star Advertiser, 4-8-11

It will take years, but Hawaii ultimately will bear a heavy burden from floating debris from the March 11 tsunami in Japan, Hawaii researchers conclude.

Projections based on drifting buoys lead the researchers to estimate that the flotsam will reach the ecologically sensitive Northwestern Hawaiian Islands within a year, brush the rest of Hawaii in two years and hit the West Coast in three years.

From there, say University of Hawaii scientists Nikolai Maximenko and Jan Hafner, the debris will drift into the so-called Great Pacific Garbage Patch, northeast of Hawaii, where it will circulate and break into smaller pieces.

As storms, eddies and the effects of El Nino push the pieces out of the patch, they will head toward Hawaii, said Maximenko.

“Some will go toward Hawaiian beaches, and other parts will slip between islands and return to the garbage patch, to return the next time,” Maximenko said in an interview. “It is safe to say after five years Hawaii will be the main coastline impacted by this debris.”

Maximenko, an oceanographer, and Hafner, a computer programmer, both with the UH-Manoa International Pacific Research Center, presented their findings at the fifth International Marine Debris Conference March 20-25 in Honolulu.

Navy photos taken off Japan soon after the March 11 tsunami show a vast floating debris field from the boats, cars, tires, steel drums, lumber, roofs — even entire villages — that were swept out to sea after the 9.0-magnitude quake.

“If you put a major city through a trash grinder and sprinkle it on the water, that’s what you’re dealing with,” Seattle oceanographer Curt Ebbesmeyer told The Associated Press.

Some of it will sink or deteriorate as it moves eastward on the North Pacific gyre, a vast clockwise circulation pattern.

But Maximenko’s studies of ocean circulation indicate that a huge amount will reach the West Coast.

“California is protected to some degree by coastal upwelling, but some significant amounts will end up on the Washington coast, British Columbia and Alaska,” he said. Some will also reach Mexico.

Its longer-term destination will be the garbage patch, an area of light winds perhaps twice the size of Texas. It was discovered by sailor Charles Moore as he returned from Hawaii after the 1997 Transpacific Yacht Race.

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