

**Post-Hearing Questions for the Record for the  
Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries  
Legislative Hearing  
1324 Longworth House Office Building  
March 23, 2023  
10:15 AM**

H.R. 764 (Rep. Boebert), “Trust the Science Act”;  
H.R. 886 (Rep. Bonamici), “Save Our Seas 2.0 Amendments Act”;  
H.R. 1245 (Rep. Hageman), “Grizzly Bear State Management Act of 2023”; and  
H.R. 1419 (Rep. Rosendale), “Comprehensive Grizzly Bear Management Act of 2023”

**Questions from Rep. Jenniffer González-Colón of Puerto Rico for Ms. Nancy Wallace,  
Marine Debris Program Director, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
(NOAA)**

**1. Natural disasters like hurricanes contribute to the problem of marine debris. These events drag household products, hazardous waste, and construction debris into our coasts and surrounding waters, and create abandoned and derelict vessels that impede navigation and damage our marine ecosystems.**

**How does the Marine Debris Program work with state, territorial, and local stakeholders to address and improve the response to marine debris in the aftermath of natural disasters?**

Disasters, both natural and anthropogenic, can produce substantial marine debris that threatens safety, navigation, and the environment. The NOAA Marine Debris Program works with local, state, tribal, territorial, and federal partners around the country to improve preparedness before disasters happen and to enhance the effectiveness of response actions in the aftermath of disasters.

The NOAA Marine Debris Program works collaboratively with local stakeholders to develop [marine debris emergency response guides](#). Emergency response guides identify organization roles and responsibilities and include an overview of permitting and compliance requirements that must be met before marine debris removal work begins. These documents outline existing response structures at the local, state, territorial, and federal levels to facilitate a coordinated and timely response to marine debris incidents impacting coastal areas. During coastal natural disaster responses, the Marine Debris Program offers expertise and support to facilitate integration of marine debris considerations described in these guides into incident specific debris plans.

**2. According to information published last year, the Marine Debris Program was working to release an Emergency Response Guide for Puerto Rico in 2022. What's the status of this effort? When could we expect Puerto Rico's Marine Debris Emergency Response Guide to be released?**

The [Puerto Rico Marine Debris Emergency Response Guide](#) was published on March 29, 2023.

**3. In addition to Emergency Response Guides, NOAA's Marine Debris Program also helps develop Marine Debris Action Plans to provide a strategic framework for partners across a specific state or region to address the problem of marine debris. Are there any ongoing or planned efforts to develop a Marine Debris Action Plan for Puerto Rico and for every other coastal state and territory that currently lacks such an action plan?**

The NOAA Marine Debris Program is working collaboratively with the Environmental Protection Agency to develop an action plan for Puerto Rico. The action plan is being developed through interviews, workshops, and individual input from stakeholders from different sectors that have experience or interest in marine debris issues. We expect to finalize and release the action plan later this year.

The NOAA Marine Debris Program has produced the following [action plans](#) for other regions or states:

- California Ocean Litter Prevention Strategy
- Florida Marine Debris Reduction Plan
- Great Lakes Marine Debris Action Plan
- Gulf of Maine Marine Debris Action Plan
- Gulf of Mexico Alliance Regional Action Plan
- Hawai'i Marine Debris Action Plan
- Long Island Sound Marine Debris Action Plan
- Mid-Atlantic Marine Debris Action Plan
- Oregon Marine Debris Action Plan
- Southeast Marine Debris Action Plan
- Virginia Marine Debris Reduction Plan
- U.S. Virgin Islands Marine Debris Action Plan
- Washington Marine Debris Action Plan

Action plan development is a long-term process, often taking several years. NOAA Marine Debris Program is also in the process of developing action plans for several regions or states that are without an action plan. Other regions or states have decided that a marine debris action plan is not currently necessary, and the Marine Debris Program is not currently proceeding with

developing action plans for those regions or states. Action plan development is also limited by the NOAA Marine Debris Program's resources and capacity.

**4. In the Fiscal Year 2023 Disaster Relief Supplemental Bill—enacted and signed into law this past December—Congress allocated \$29 million in supplemental funding to NOAA for expenses related to the 2022 hurricanes and natural disasters, including for marine debris assessment and removal. Could you provide the Subcommittee an update on this? That is, how much of this supplemental funding does NOAA plan to allocate for marine debris efforts and what process will be followed to select and issue awards?**

We appreciate the supplemental funding provided by Congress for disaster response. The NOAA Marine Debris Program has a proven track record in executing funding to assess, remove, and dispose of marine debris that has impacted coastal communities as a result of a natural disaster, such as a hurricane.

NOAA is currently working on finalizing the spend plan for the funding from the FY 2023 Disaster Relief Supplemental Bill. As soon as it is finalized, we will be able to provide specifics on funding levels and our execution plan for the funding.

**5. Among other provisions, the Save Our Seas 2.0 Act established a Marine Debris Foundation to support and complement NOAA's efforts to address marine debris. Could you provide us an update on the status of the Foundation's operations and how NOAA intends to work with it moving forward?**

The Save Our Seas 2.0 Act of 2020, Public Law 116-224, enacted on December 18, 2020, established the Marine Debris Foundation (Foundation) as a charitable nonprofit organization to support the efforts of NOAA and others to address marine debris. The Act directed the Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere (NOAA Administrator) to appoint the Foundation's governing Board of Directors (Board).

NOAA announced the appointment of the inaugural Board of the Foundation on April 6, 2022. Dr. Ginny Eckhert, Director of Alaska Sea Grant, was elected as Chair of the Board. The Board has met several times for business and Board meetings.

The Foundation will be an important partner to NOAA and other entities who are tackling the immense challenges that marine debris poses to nature, human health, and the U.S. economy.

The Foundation is an independent organization. The NOAA Marine Debris Program provided financial support for the initial activities of the Foundation through a contract with The Ocean

Foundation. The Ocean Foundation provided expertise in the areas of establishing and operating a nonprofit organization, and assisted with the first two Board meetings.

Due to the 33 percent lower levels of annual appropriated funds for the Marine Debris Program in FY 2022 compared to FY 2021 Enacted levels, which has continued through FY 2023, NOAA had to temporarily suspend funding to the Foundation. NOAA is requesting an increase in the FY 2024 President's Budget to increase funding levels of the Marine Debris Program to levels that will allow NOAA to reinstate financial support for the Foundation, as authorized in the Save Our Seas 2.0 Act.

Dr. Spinrad, NOAA Administrator, serves on the Board and is chairing the Executive Director Search Committee. As the Board of Directors continues its work to establish the operations and activities of the Foundation, NOAA looks forward to growing our partnership and working collaboratively to address the problem of marine debris.

**6. One of my biggest concerns when thinking of marine debris is the issue of microplastics. As you know, because of their small size, wildlife can mistake microplastics for food and ingest them, impacting their bodily functions. Microplastics can also attract and carry pollutants. Moreover, in addition to their environmental impact, some believe microplastics may harm human health. However, additional research and studies are needed on this.**

**Could you discuss how NOAA's Marine Debris Program is working to improve our understanding and research of microplastics?**

Understanding microplastics and their impacts on people and the environment is an active and rapidly growing area of research. The NOAA Marine Debris Program has provided funding through competitive research funding opportunities to better understand the distribution, abundance, and impacts of microplastic debris.

For example, the NOAA Marine Debris Program is currently funding several research projects examining how microplastics move through the environment, including how they move from rivers into the ocean, and has previously funded studies on how microplastics may impact important commercial fish species, including blue crab and rainbow trout.

In FY 2021, the NOAA Marine Debris program provided funding for a project examining marine debris in the Guánica Watershed, including how it moves into the nearshore coastal waters of southwest Puerto Rico and how it may break down over time into microplastics. Researchers are looking at the sources of debris, how debris transport varies across the wet and dry seasons, and what factors influence debris degradation.

In FY 2020, NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) launched a pilot project to archive published data on floating marine microplastics in the NOAA's data archive and establish a geodatabase. Since the launch of the [NCEI Marine Microplastics geodatabase and ArcGIS portal](#), this pilot program has become the latest marine indicator product in NCEI's portfolio. Currently the geodatabase has grown to almost 14,000 floating microplastics data points globally. In FY 2023 there are plans to expand this geodatabase to include data on sub-surface, seafloor, and beach microplastic concentrations, including relevant data from NOAA Marine Debris Program projects.