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Up to 20 millions tons of tsunami debris headed for U.S. shores

An estimated 5 tons to 20 tons of debris sucked into the ocean during Japan's massive tsunami is due to hit U.S. shores, University of Hawaii scientists say.

By Deborah Netburn

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Prepare for a garbage deluge.

An estimated 5 tons to 20 tons of debris sucked into the ocean during Japan's massive tsunami is due to hit U.S. shores, University of Hawaii scientists say. The wall of water struck in March, so that means the garbage should be here -- sometime in 2014.

Hey, it takes a long time to cross the Pacific Ocean if you're a couch. Or a fridge. Or a piece of a house. Or a Coke can.

Earlier this year, Nikolai Maximenko, a senior researcher at the International Pacific Research Center in Hawaii, developed a model of how the tsunami debris is likely to move across the ocean. He based his model on the movements of thousands of buoys placed in the ocean over 30 years for purposes of studying the current.

According to Maximenko's calculations, the debris from the tsunami will wash up at Midway Atoll (an island midway between Japan and Hawaii) this winter. It will start washing up on Hawaiian shores in the winter or spring of 2013. And in the beginning of 2014, it will hit the West Coast, mostly Oregon and Washington. (California will most likely be spared.)


Earlier this fall, Maximenko and Jan Hofman, a computer researcher who also worked on the model, got hard evidence that the garbage appears to be moving as they expected: A Russian ship, the STS Pallada, found an array of tsunami debris on its homeward voyage from Honolulu to Vladivostok.

Most of the debris likely didn't start out as garbage, but rather as pieces of people's lives. Such a fact lends poignancy to the bits of plastic and wood, both large and small, we can expect in this country.

To be clear, the debris is not moving across the ocean en masse.

In an interview with The Times, Hofman said the moving debris field would be patchy, like "confetti

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soup." Some items will sink as they move across the Pacific, he said, but not as many as you might think.

What is likely to sink has already sunk. And the plastics, he said, are virtually indestructible.

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