

The U.S. House of Representatives this week passed legislation that will help clean up and prevent the spread of marine debris in the nation's waterways and oceans — a move praised by the National Marine Manufacturers Association.

"The threat to the environment, tourism, marine wildlife, boaters and navigation posed by marine debris churning in our oceans is a real threat," said Monita Fontaine, NMMA vice president and senior counsel for government relations, in a statement.

The bill, S. 362, the Marine Debris Research Prevention and Reduction Act, would create programs within the U.S. Coast Guard and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to clean up and reduce the amount of marine debris in oceans and coastal areas, and to mitigate the effects of marine debris on health and navigation.

"Marine debris poses safety risks through clogged engine water intakes, fouled propellers, and pathogens released into the environment that can cause sickness in people and marine life — it is a problem we cannot ignore," said NMMA president Thom Dammrich, in a statement.

Fontaine testified before Congress in September 2005 in support of this legislation. She cited Environmental Protection Agency facts that show 80 percent of marine debris originates from land-based sources. As a result of her testimony, the NMMA says unnecessary regulations on recreational boaters and marine operators, who comprise "a tiny fraction" of marine debris origination, were dropped.

It is estimated that common household items that comprise marine debris take decades to biodegrade. A plastic bag will take 10 to 20 years to degrade in the ocean, a plastic cup 50 years, an aluminum can 80 to 200 years, a plastic soda bottle 450 years, and fishing line 600 years, according to NMMA.

National programs are under way to collect and properly dispose of marine debris. A cleanup project in 2001 removed 3.6 million pounds of debris from more than 7,700 miles of coasts, shorelines, and underwater sites. Cleanup efforts in Hawaii are even seeking to turn collected debris into electricity. It is estimated 100 tons of debris will generate enough electricity through incineration for 43 homes for a year.

The bill now progresses to a final conference committee to iron out differences in the Senate- and House-passed versions. The Senate passed a stronger bill in July that authorized \$15 million more than the \$60 million in programs over five years passed in the House version.

"We expect the House and Senate will reconcile the differences in the two versions and send this legislation to the President for his signature before the end of the year," Fontaine said. "It's a legislative win for the boating public and avid outdoorsmen."