Marine Debris Work Group and Ocean Mapping and Data Team (OMDT) Work Group Breakout Session, Tuesday, May 4, 2021

Marine Debris Work Group

The time in this breakout session was split evenly between topics, with discussion initially centering on MACO's marine debris work. Laura McKay, program manager for the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program, and Maureen Krudner, environmental scientist for U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 2, led with a summary of recent efforts by the work group. The group is currently working on a public awareness campaign geared toward stopping balloon releases and preventing their litter on beaches and in marine environments. McKay announced that data summarizing the prevalence of balloon litter and other trash found during beach sweeps in the region will soon be mapped on the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal. The group is seeking grant support for work that would target the problem of plastic bottle disposal in coastal environments. Planning is also underway for a virtual marine debris summit July 20 – 22 focused on single-use plastics, derelict fishing gear, microplastics and balloon litter. Responding to a question about the difficulty of raising awareness of such distinct issues, McKay noted that focus groups are being employed to determine social marketing messages that are effective. She observed that the issue of balloon litter requires extra sensitivity since people often organize releases as memorials for loved ones. When one participant asked whether ocean and meteorological conditions were impacting balloon litter in the region, the discussion shifted to data that suggested balloons released inland may travel with air currents and hit a virtual wall near the coast, finally coming down on the beaches and near-shore waters. One attendee reported that hot spots have been found along Virginia's Eastern Shore, the most severe being Fisherman's Island, located where the Chesapeake Bay meets the ocean.

Ocean mapping and data team

McKay and MARCO Senior Advisor Nick Napoli then led an introduction to current efforts of the Portal development team. McKay mentioned a few examples of data gaps she hopes to see filled in the future, such as sea turtle distributions and the locations of corals along the continental shelf. A scientist whose work involves producing ocean observing data asked McKay and Napoli if they had any advice on what time scales they can use to ensure their data can be transferable and useful for the Portal. Napoli noted that the answer varies from product to product, and ultimately depends on the needs of users. Another participant asked about how the Portal's "Ocean Stories" topics are determined, whether they have been successful in generating traffic, and who tends to use them. Portal team member Karl Vilacoba replied that an emphasis in recent Portal work plans has been expanding the types of industries and ocean

users profiled and including more diverse voices in the features. He added that the features are educational in nature and have been particularly well received as classroom tools. Looking ahead, McKay said she anticipates the OMDT will work to improve the Portal's tourism and recreation data, in keeping with MARCO's expanding work on the blue economy.