

THE TEXAS ADOPT-A-BEACH PROGRAM: A  
PUBLIC/PRIVATE APPROACH TO CLEAN BEACHES

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ABSTRACT

The Texas Adopt-A-Beach Program, founded in 1986 by Texas Land Commissioner Garry Mauro, is made up of private citizens who volunteer to clean Texas beaches three times a year, and is managed by the Texas General Land Office. The program was conceived both as a short-term solution to the problem of trash on Texas beaches and as a means of advancing long-term, permanent solutions to the problem of marine debris: the ratification of Annex V of MARPOL, the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, and the implementation of effective enforcement measures.

The Adopt-A-Beach Program organizes two coastwide beach cleanups a year. The success of these cleanups--nearly 25,000 volunteers have removed 1,000 tons of garbage from Texas beaches--has enabled the program to shift its emphasis to public education about the tremendous economic and environmental damage caused by ocean dumping of garbage. Children are the focus of educational projects that include a coloring book and puppet show featuring the program's mascot, Lucky the Dolphin, and the development of a marine debris curriculum for public schools. The program has also produced videotaped public service announcements for statewide broadcast and has sponsored special awareness events in conjunction with cleanups.

Data collected by volunteers during cleanups were instrumental in building support in Congress for Senate ratification of the international MARPOL Annex V and implementation legislation for the annex in the United States. Annex V prohibits the dumping of plastics in the ocean and sets strict limits on dumping of other solid wastes overboard. The volunteer-collected data are also being used in support of making the Gulf of Mexico a special area under the annex. Dumping of any kind is prohibited in special area waters.

## INTRODUCTION

Texas Land Commissioner Garry Mauro founded the Texas Adopt-A-Beach Program in 1986 after taking part in a coastwide beach cleanup organized by the Center for Environmental Education (now the Center for Marine Conservation). In the course of this 3-h event, 2,700 volunteers collected 124 tons of trash from 196 km (122 mi) of beach. It was clear that this volume of trash could not be attributed to beach littering alone; the quantity and the nature of the debris indicated that most of it had washed ashore in tides of waterborne refuse.

Astonished at the quantity of trash on Texas beaches, and recognizing the heavy environmental and economic penalties of this pollution, Commissioner Mauro decided to investigate the problem and determine what role the General Land Office could play in solving it. He began by forming an in-house task force to study the sources of beach debris, to research existing legal and institutional remedies, and to map out an action plan.

Both a 1985 Texas Coastal and Marine Council report and the Center for Environmental Education's report on the 1986 beach cleanup concluded that some 75 to 90% of the trash on Texas beaches originates offshore, about two-thirds of it dumped from ships. Refuse discarded in the Gulf of Mexico is not washed out to sea. What fails to sink is held in gulf waters by loop currents until oblique alongshore currents carry it to shore. For this reason, the beach cleaning efforts of cities and counties along the Texas coast have provided only temporary relief, and at great cost: the State's coastal communities spend about \$14 million each year on the endless task of cleaning their beaches.

### The Texas Approach

Two needs were immediately apparent: the need to raise public awareness of the magnitude of the beach garbage problem in Texas, and the need for a broad-based, unified approach to its solution, concentrating on the sources of beach debris.

An obvious objective was to work for U.S. ratification of Annex V to MARPOL 73/78 to prohibit ocean dumping of plastic and restrict the discharge of other types of solid waste at sea. The severity of the beach pollution problem in Texas led to a second: to persuade the International Maritime Organization to designate the Wider Caribbean Region (the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea) as a special area where virtually all dumping would be banned. But the General Land Office began with state-level action that would yield positive results more quickly.

As manager of the state's surface and mineral interests in about 1.62 million ha (4 million acres) of submerged land on the Texas gulf coast, the General Land Office issues leases, easements, and permits for a variety of activities. The agency's first step was to adopt emergency rules prohibiting the dumping of solid waste from offshore platforms and seismic vessels operating in Texas waters under state permits. These were later followed by no-dumping rules (and parallel contract provisions) for marinas, wharves, piers, fishing cabins, and all other structures on state-owned coastal land.

Next, to draw public attention to the amount of trash and garbage accumulating on Texas beaches, to augment existing beach cleanup efforts, and to involve citizens in the crusade against marine debris, the General Land Office instituted the Texas Adopt-A-Beach Program.

The program was modeled after the Adopt-A-Highway Program organized by the Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation. The Adopt-A-Highway Program has proven highly successful both as a cleanup program and as a public awareness campaign to discourage roadside littering. It was felt that the adoption format, already familiar to Texans, would work equally well for the state's beaches. The Highway Department's slogan, "Don't Mess with Texas," was expanded to "Don't Mess With Texas Beaches" for the beach cleanup campaign.

#### Response to the Program

The Adopt-A-Beach Program won immediate enthusiastic support in Texas. Adopters were secured for all 172 easily accessible Texas beach miles within the first year of the program, and even some segments accessible only by boat or four-wheel-drive vehicle found sponsors. Most adopting groups have renewed their adoption agreements annually. Businesses, philanthropic foundations, entertainers, advertisers, and private citizens have made generous contributions of funding, supplies, services, and promotional assistance.

Since the program's first coastwide cleanup in April 1987, nearly 25,000 volunteers have removed more than 1,000 tons of trash from Texas beaches. An analysis of data collected during coastwide cleanups, prepared by the (then) Center for Environmental Education, was presented to the U.S. Congress and to the International Maritime Organization as evidence documenting the need for U.S. ratification of MARPOL Annex V, the passage of national enforcement legislation, and designation of the Wider Caribbean Region as a special area under the annex.

The spirit of the Adopt-A-Beach Program has spread beyond state boundaries and beyond U.S. borders. The Texas program has been emulated by other coastal states, and it is now spreading to Central America. In September 1988, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida joined forces in a "Take Pride Gulfwide" beach cleanup sponsored by the U.S. Minerals Management Service. A symbolic beach adoption agreement entered into by the students of Flour Bluff Junior High School near Corpus Christi, Texas, and the children of Costa Rica in the spring of 1988 immediately led to the establishment of a national Costa Rican beach cleanup program.

#### PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND OPERATION

The Adopt-A-Beach Program takes its direction from State Government, but it is operated at the county level by an all-volunteer work force and is dependent upon private funding and in-kind donations of supplies and services.

An Adopt-A-Beach Task Force appointed by Commissioner Mauro developed guidelines for the program and oversees its operations. This advisory

body, whose members now number about 55, represents a broad range of coastal interests: Federal, state, and local government; oil, gas, and chemical production; tourism; shipping; agriculture; waste disposal and recycling; scientific research; and conservation. The task force meets periodically in full session for program review and planning. Three subcommittees--Finance, Education, and Legislation--hold independent meetings.

The General Land Office, as administrator of the Adopt-A-Beach Program, coordinates all program activities with the assistance of the Adopt-A-Beach task force. It oversees beach adoptions, promotes the program statewide, solicits funding, organizes two annual coastwide cleanups, and develops educational materials and programs. The agency also maintains a toll-free number for in-state inquiries about the program and publishes a quarterly newsletter, the Texas Beach Bulletin,

The Texas Conservation Foundation, a state agency empowered to manage and expend donated funds, is financial trustee for the Adopt-A-Beach Program. It manages a special fund established to receive tax-deductible contributions for the support of program activities. Monies from the fund are used for:

- the purchase and shipment of cleanup supplies, including trash bags, data cards, and pencils;
- the purchase and installation of beach signs marking adopted beach segments and crediting adopting groups;
- printing and mailing of the program's newsletter, certificates, posters, brochures, and other promotional and educational materials;
- operation of the program's toll-free telephone line; and
- promotional events to publicize the program and to recruit sponsors and cleanup volunteers.

A network of volunteer county coordinators provides grassroots leadership for the program. They recruit and register adopting groups, handle local cleanup logistics, and promote the program within their communities. This structure is not only practical, but also capitalizes on community pride--a powerful force in sustaining the program's momentum.

To join the program, groups sign an adoption agreement that commits them to cleaning a designated beach segment (usually 1.6 km (1 mi)) three times within a 1-year period, participating in the program's two coastwide cleanups and conducting a third cleanup independently. The agreement also releases the Adopt-A-Beach Program from liability for any injury incurred during a beach cleanup. Each adopting group receives an adoption certificate, and the group's name is listed on a sign installed at the access road nearest its adopted beach segment.

Groups now enrolled in the program include civic clubs, sporting clubs, chambers of commerce, large corporations, small businesses, conservation organizations, public schools, colleges, Scout troops, state agencies, cities, property owners' associations, and families.

The program's two annual coastwide cleanups are cosponsored by nonprofit organizations. The "Great Texas Beach Trash-Off," held in April of each year, is cosponsored by Keep Texas Beautiful, Inc. The "Texas Coastal Cleanup," held in September during Coastweeks, is cosponsored by the Center for Marine Conservation. Participants in these cleanups include independent volunteers as well as affiliates of the Adopt-A-Beach Program. Local coordinators distribute trash bags, data cards, and pencils to all cleanup volunteers.

The data cards provide spaces for the tabulation of items within seven broad categories (plastic, glass, Styrofoam, metal, paper, wood, and rubber), for the notation of labels that might indicate the sources of items collected, for recording the number of trash bags filled, and for reporting sightings of stranded or entangled animals.

#### PROGRAM PROMOTION

The Adopt-A-Beach Program employs a variety of means to publicize the adoption program, advertise coastwide cleanups, and recruit volunteers and sponsors. The program carries its promotional efforts statewide to remind noncoastal Texans that they are residents of a coastal state, that they benefit from the coastal area both directly and indirectly, and that they should share the responsibility for protection of coastal waters and beaches.

#### Recruitment

When the program was first organized, the General Land Office recruited county coordinators through telephone calls, letters, and personal visits to community leaders and known environmentalists along the coast. The same procedures were used by the General Land Office Adopt-A-Beach staff and county coordinators to enlist adopters. Lists of prospective adopters were compiled from target groups such as garden clubs, 4-H clubs, local branches of oil and gas companies, and waste disposal companies.

Early recruitment was greatly facilitated by television and newspaper coverage of press conferences preceding the program's first coastwide beach cleanup in the spring of 1987 and by establishment of the program's toll-free telephone number (1-800-85-BEACH). Now that the program is well known, it has become less necessary to engage in aggressive recruitment of participants. New county coordinators, new adopting groups, and sponsors often initiate contact with the program.

#### Solicitation of Financial and In-Kind Support

All public information materials produced by the Adopt-A-Beach Program emphasize that the program is dependent upon private donations for its

operation and that such donations are tax-deductible. The program solicits contributions of money, supplies, or services through direct appeals to companies that have a reputation for supporting environmental causes or that are likely to appreciate the benefits of association with an environmental improvement program. It has also sought grants from foundations known to support conservation efforts.

Financial donations to the Adopt-A-Beach Program have included a 3-year grant of \$50,000 from the Moody Foundation of Galveston, a \$5,000 grant from the Fondren Foundation of Houston, and a contribution of \$10,500 from Browning-Ferris Industries, a waste disposal company. Other contributions have come from oil and gas companies, law firms, and numerous private individuals.

In-kind donations to the program have included bumper stickers, trash bags, celebrity promotions, refreshments for cleanup participants, and pickup of filled trash bags after beach cleanups. The Mobil Corporation donated 100,000 garbage bags valued at \$13,000 to the program in 1988, and Maryland Club Foods donated 9,700 bags for the 1989 Great Texas Beach Trash-Off. One of the first in-kind donations to the program was 15,000 "Don't Mess With Texas Beaches" bumper stickers, provided by a beer distributor.

In 1988, 23 outdoor advertising companies donated space along major routes to the coast for 300 billboards displaying the "Don't Mess With Texas Beaches" slogan and the program's toll-free number. Most of the billboards were printed with money from the Adopt-A-Beach fund and posted by companies that donated the advertising space, but some companies painted billboards free-of-charge.

#### Media Coverage

The Texas Adopt-A-Beach Program has benefited from both local and national media attention. After the April 1987 coastwide cleanup, articles appeared in the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times, and both Time and Newsweek magazines featured articles about the status of beaches in America as front-cover stories. In August 1987, Commissioner Mauro discussed the problem of beach trash in Texas as a guest on the ABC television news program Good Morning, America.

Press coverage of program activities is invaluable in advertising the program, mustering volunteers for coastwide cleanups, and publicizing cleanup results. Press releases are issued to newspapers, radio stations, and television stations in advance of cleanups and as soon as statistics on the number of volunteers participating and the tons of trash collected are available afterward.

The adoption of a mascot, an Atlantic bottlenose dolphin named Lucky, enlivened the Adopt-A-Beach Program's promotional campaign and gave the program a symbol with appeal for children. Lucky, a performer at Sea-Arama Marineworld in Galveston, Texas, is an especially appropriate mascot for the program because he was a victim of marine debris, barely surviving

entanglement in an abandoned fishing net. He was given his fitting name by the veterinarians of the Marine Mammal Stranding Network who nursed him back to health.

Public service announcements are produced for radio and television broadcast before every coastwide beach cleanup. The program's first videotaped public service announcement featured Lucky and Texas rock musician Joe "King" Carrasco. The second video, featuring actor Randy Quaid, was produced to advertise the 1989 Great Texas Beach Trash-Off. A third was produced to publicize the MARPOL Annex V regulations. All public service announcements are distributed statewide.

#### Printed Materials

The program produces brochures and posters to advertise coastwide cleanups. These are sent to county coordinators, adopting groups, coastal chambers of commerce, public libraries, hotels and motels, and other businesses for distribution. Cleanup brochures list the names and telephone numbers of county coordinators, the locations of designated beach check-in points for volunteers, and the names of hotels and motels offering discounts to cleanup workers.

The quarterly Texas Beach Bulletin, with a current circulation of about 3,300, summarizes Adopt-A-Beach Program activities, announces cleanup dates, reports results of coastwide cleanups, and acknowledges donations to the program. It serves as an educational as well as a promotional tool, containing articles about national and international efforts to combat marine debris. The newsletter is sent to Adopt-A-Beach Program participants and supporters and is included in the information packet mailed to anyone who calls or writes to inquire about the program.

#### PUBLIC EDUCATION

With the beach cleanup program well established in all coastal counties, the Adopt-A-Beach Program is concentrating on public education projects, including educational materials and programs for children, an awareness drive targeting recreational boaters, and a campaign to promote recycling. An important element of all these efforts is publicizing the requirements and expected results of MARPOL Annex V.

#### Outreach to Children

Children are the primary target of educational efforts. In the summer of 1988, the Adopt-A-Beach Program introduced an educational program for preschool and primary-grade children. Its components are a slide show, a puppet show, and a "Don't Mess With Texas Beaches" coloring book.

The slide show contrasts clean and littered beaches, shows how trash reaches the beach and how it can harm birds and marine animals, and tells the story of Lucky the Dolphin. In the puppet show, called "Joey Saves the Day," a boy fishing from a boat rescues Lucky and his friend Clipper the Crab from the Trash Monster. In the 11-page coloring book, Lucky points

out the hazards of beach litter and floating trash and urges children to help keep beaches clean. Simple lyrics for a series of beach cleanup songs set to familiar tunes are printed in the back of the book.

The educational program has been presented to an estimated 4,000 children at day-care centers, public libraries, museums, and elementary schools in Austin and coastal cities and has proven very effective in interesting children in the cause of beach protection. Because the puppet show has been so well received by teachers, librarians, and children, it is being videotaped for distribution throughout the state. Coloring books have been given to all children attending the program, and at least 20,000 more have been distributed by mail. Five hundred Spanish-language versions of the coloring book were sent to children in Costa Rica.

The Adopt-A-Beach Program is now working on a formal marine debris curriculum for kindergartens and elementary schools. It will include lessons about the nature and importance of marine and coastal resources; the damage caused by marine debris, particularly plastics; and recycling as a solution to the problem of solid waste in the environment.

The program staff is preparing a curriculum outline in consultation with the Education Subcommittee of the Adopt-A-Beach Task Force. To ensure that the curriculum meets state requirements for public school use, the staff is also coordinating development of the project with the Texas Education Agency. It is anticipated that the actual writing of the curriculum will be contracted to an educational consultant.

#### **Promoting Awareness Among Recreational Boaters**

The Adopt-A-Beach Program is working with the Boating Trades Association of Texas and the Marina Association of Texas to make boaters aware of the need for their cooperation in the battle against marine debris. The program's first public service video was directed at recreational fishermen and boaters, urging them not to discard trash overboard. The Boating Trades Association and the Marina Association have distributed "Stow It-- Don't Throw It" bumper stickers that include the Adopt-A-Beach Program and Center for Environmental Education logos.

#### **Recycling Campaign**

The Adopt-A-Beach Program is broadening its mission by promoting recycling as a practical means to reduce solid waste in the environment and alleviate the burden on landfills. The focus of the recycling campaign is plastic, which makes up some 60% of the trash collected in coastwide beach cleanups.

General Land Office staff helped draft container-coding legislation for introduction in the 1989 session of the Texas Legislature. Information about the proposed law, which would require coding of plastic containers by resin type to facilitate recycling, has been published in the program's newsletter.

In conjunction with the April 1988 coastwide cleanup, the Society for the Plastics Industry sponsored a plastics recycling demonstration for cleanup volunteers at South Padre Island. In September 1988, Shell Oil Company sponsored a "Trash Bash" for volunteers who brought glass, paper, aluminum, and plastic to Sea-Arama Marineworld in Galveston for pickup by recycling companies.

To further encourage beach cleanup volunteers to become recyclers, and to take advantage of the opportunity to recycle large amounts of beach debris, participants in the 1989 Great Texas Beach Trash-Off were asked to separate the trash they picked up from the beach, putting recyclable materials into orange bags, and nonrecyclable trash into white bags. Keep Texas Beautiful, Inc., cosponsor of the cleanup, made arrangements for collection of the recyclable trash by local companies.

In conjunction with the 1 April 1989 Great Texas Beach Trash-Off, the Texas Arts Council and Business Volunteers for the Arts/Houston joined the Adopt-A-Beach Program in sponsoring a juried beach trash sculpture contest in Galveston. The contest was conceived as a means of publicizing the sources and types of debris found on Texas beaches, drawing attention to the program's cleanup and recycling campaigns, and adding the arts community to interests endorsing the beach cleanup program.

A brochure containing contest guidelines and an entry form was distributed to members of the Texas Arts Council and to artists on a mailing list supplied by the Texas Commission for the Arts. Posters advertising the contest, called "Trash for Art's Sake," were sent to art museums and galleries. Cash prizes were awarded to the top three winners, and other contestants received honorable mention. Ten prize-winning entries will tour art museums throughout the state before being donated to coastal museums for permanent display.

#### FUTURE OF THE PROGRAM

##### Special Area Designation

Data collected by Texas volunteers in future beach cleanups will permit evaluation of the effectiveness of MARPOL Annex V regulations in reducing the amount of plastic and other floating debris reaching Texas shores. The data will also support the Texas Adopt-A-Beach Program's ongoing effort to secure special area designation for the Wider Caribbean Region under the annex.

The Adopt-A-Beach Program will continue to encourage the establishment of parallel beach cleanup programs throughout the Caribbean region. The success of the Costa Rican beach cleanup program has inspired both Panama and Honduras to establish similar programs, and it is hoped that other countries will follow suit. The demonstration of widespread, serious concern about marine debris in the Wider Caribbean should benefit the cause of special area designation.

### Continuing Educational and Awareness Projects

The program will continue to stress the importance of recycling as a solution to the solid waste problem and will work to promote the expansion of recycling efforts throughout the state. The Adopt-A-Beach staff is cooperating with the Bryan and College Station, Texas, independent school district in a program that will combine classroom education with an active recycling project for public school students next year.

An expanded awareness campaign will be undertaken to educate recreational boaters about the hazards of marine debris, to inform them about MARPOL Annex V regulations, and to encourage all marinas on the Texas coast to provide garbage reception facilities like those the General Land Office now requires for marinas on state-owned land. The Adopt-A-Beach Program will supply boaters with garbage bags and award certificates of appreciation to volunteers who pledge to participate in an aquatic version of the beach cleanup program.

### Research and Planning

The Adopt-A-Beach Program is helping Texas ports prepare to contend with the plastic refuse that will be off-loaded by ships in accordance with MARPOL Annex V regulations. The program is helping the ports locate researchers, waste management companies, and recycling companies that can supply needed planning assistance, equipment, and services.

The Adopt-A-Beach Program is also represented on the Marine Debris Technical Subcommittee of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Gulf of Mexico Program, assisting with data collection, data analysis, and exploration of methods to alleviate both marine and beach debris throughout the gulf region.

### Addressing Land-Based Sources of Beach Debris

The reduction--and, it is hoped, eventual elimination--of marine debris in the Gulf of Mexico will not entirely solve the problem of solid waste pollution of Texas beaches. Though offshore sources are to be blamed for most of the trash fouling the state's shoreline and nearshore waters, land-based sources make a substantial contribution. For this reason, the utility of the Adopt-A-Beach Program will not soon be diminished.

Land-based sources--onshore dumping, river-transported trash, and persistent littering--will be the target of future Adopt-A-Beach Program awareness efforts. Data collected by beach cleanup volunteers can provide estimates of the amount of beach trash attributable to these sources and can help to identify chief offenders.

### CONCLUSION

The rapid success of the Adopt-A-Beach Program in establishing a strong alliance between government and the private sector in the crusade against marine debris, in stirring citizen activism both within and beyond

Texas, and in becoming a catalyst for the statewide expansion of solid waste control efforts exceeded 1986 expectations. The program's influence can be largely attributed to timing: it was inaugurated at a time when Americans had at last begun to realize that pollution of coastal waters and shorelines had reached a critical stage.

But it cannot be assumed that no one among the volunteers who rallied to the cry "Don't Mess With Texas Beaches" would have been willing to participate in a coastal cleanup effort years earlier. In fact, many program volunteers were already participants in, or supporters of, other conservation efforts. Those who were not may just have been waiting for direction.

The Adopt-A-Beach Program provided that direction. It has succeeded because it offers an easy avenue for citizen participation, enabling citizens from all walks of life to make an important contribution to the coastal cleanup effort. Those who cannot provide hands-on assistance at the beach can support the program by donating money, supplies, or services. Those who can offer neither physical nor financial support for program activities can be of equal help by simply spreading the word--by helping to heighten public awareness of the environmental and economic costs of marine debris. The program's design has facilitated development of the broad base of informed support essential to genuine progress against so widespread and complex a problem.