

# Marine Debris Summit

Remarks by Doug Domenech  
Virginia Secretary of Natural Resources

Thank you very much Laura and good morning everyone.

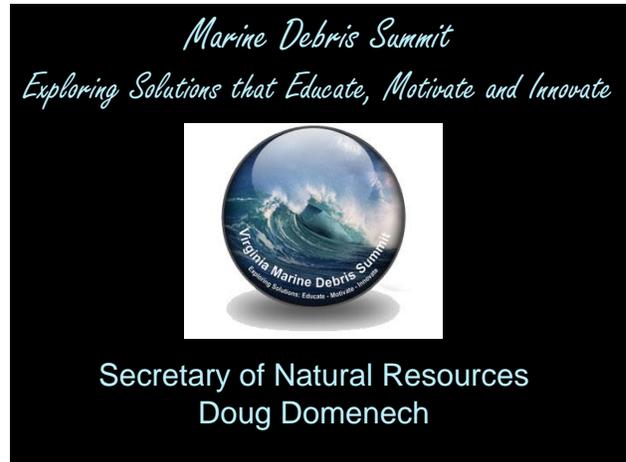
I want to thank the organizers of this Summit.

The subject is important to me personally, but it is really important to marine life whether in the ocean, the Chesapeake Bay, or our rivers and streams.

I suppose my love of the ocean started when I was young.

My family is from Puerto Rico. My father left the island after graduating from college and I returned often growing up. After living in the Dominican Republic and Panama briefly, I returned to Puerto Rico for most of my High School years.

In each of those places I lived on or often visited the beach.



I was fortunate, later during my time at the Department of the Interior, to work on ocean preservation while serving as the Acting Assistant Secretary for Insular Affairs. This is usually when I ask people how many US territories there are and can you name them. (USVI, PR, CNMI, Guam, Am Samoa....). That office also works with America's three Freely Associated States (Palau, Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.) These island communities are made up of hundreds of islands across the Pacific.

One the most rewarding issues I have ever

worked on was President Bush's protection of 195,280 square miles of marine national monuments consisting of an area around the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, including the Mariana Trench. Also in American Samoa, the Rose Atoll ; and central Pacific, coral reefs, pinnacles, sea mounts, islands and surrounding waters of Johnston Atoll, Howland, Baker and Jarvis Islands, Kingman Reef, Palmyra Atoll and Wake Island. These areas harbor some of the most pristine coral reefs in the world. Few people realize that it was President Bush who created the largest marine monument in history.

While there are many threats to these and the waters of the Mid-Atlantic off Virginia, marine debris is one of those on which we should really be able to make better progress.

But a major recurrent problem in the Pacific is the presence of the Pacific gyre which moves marine debris around the ocean and deposits trash, mostly plastics, on the beaches of these tiny islands.

Perhaps you will remember this scene in The Graduate, one of the top 100 quotes from movies:

Dustin Hoffman is young Benjamin.

**Mr. McGuire:** I want to say one word to you. Just one word.

**Benjamin:** Yes, sir.

**Mr. McGuire:** Are you listening?

**Benjamin:** Yes, I am.

**Mr. McGuire:** **Plastics.**

**Benjamin:** Exactly how do you mean?

**Mr. McGuire:** There's a great future in plastics. Think about it. Will you think about it?



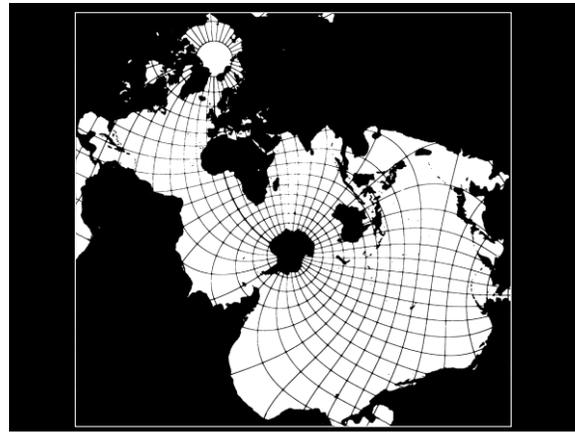
Well there is a problem with plastic.

It is persistent, it does not degrade (or at least it does not degrade fast enough), it floats, and can turn a beautiful beach into this.

But perhaps worst of all, it looks like food.



If you look closely in the skeletons of these sea albatross you will see the plastic they ingested.



There is truly only one ocean. What we do in Virginia – what we throw “away” in Virginia, can find its way to almost any part of this contiguous ocean.



### Sources

More and more people are becoming aware of the sources of marine debris, and realize that our daily actions and choices do make a difference. We all live downstream. How we handle our waste determines if it becomes a recycled item, or if it becomes litter or if it finds its way into our solid waste system and ultimately...the ocean....

I live in the historic Fan District of Richmond. My wife and I walk often and our conversation regularly strays to whether the street we are walking on is the trashiest street, usually littered with cigarette butts and plastic.

I simply do not understand how otherwise enlightened, well educated people have no problem throwing trash on the ground. I have often thought we should stop picking it up for them.

Even well meaning celebrations that include balloon releases have negative effects.



Virginia Tech 2012 32-Mile Run in Remembrance



Impacts

The impacts of marine debris are also becoming better understood.

Impacts on wildlife, on habitats, on biodiversity, on our economy and our own health.

Beaches that look like this are not tourist attractions.

Tourism is one of Virginia's largest industries and ranks 8<sup>th</sup> in the nation for domestic visitor spending. We cannot afford to compromise this industry.



Impacts

And there's so much plastic debris escaping into our waters that we are creating a "plastic soup" that is now at least in microscopic levels, in our food chain.



Volunteering helps but...

Friends of Lower Appomattox

Shenandoah River Volunteers

Virginians care about clean water.

They demonstrate this by volunteering in the thousands every year in various regional and statewide cleanup events through programs such as Adopt a Stream, Adopt a Highway, VA Waterways Cleanup, Potomac River Cleanup, Clean the Bay Day, James River Cleanup, and many more watershed and local events.



Chesapeake Bay Foundation at First Landing State Park.

But remedial efforts – cleaning up as much debris as we can – is no substitute for keeping debris out of our rivers, coastal waters and ocean.

**We need long-range planning for preventative solutions**

So this is why we are here today.

To explore technical, legal, voluntary, market-based and other solutions to reducing marine debris.

Personally I think it is going to take creative communications to get the message out.



I actually could care less if someone smokes. I just don't want to see their butts.

VCU's impact on butts around the PHB building.

**Build on our Successes**



Virginia has a strong solid waste infrastructure /industry and we have created some successful programs like the crab pot retrieval program that is win-win-win for all involved.

## 32,000 abandoned crab pots recovered



The Virginia Marine Debris Removal Program was a partnership between the Commonwealth and watermen that to date has removed over 32,000 lost or abandoned crab pots from Virginia waters. It is the largest removal program in the nation.

About 20% of deployed crab pots are lost annually. Lost and abandoned crab pots continue to capture and kill blue crabs and other animals for several years.



The Commonwealth, working with scientists from the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, is working on ways to reduce the impact of lost pots through education to avoid pot loss and innovation such as biodegradable escape panels on pots.

So now is the time to focus on SOLUTIONS to this preventable type of pollution.

We have passionate nonprofit groups working on litter prevention, education and outreach like Clean VA Waterways and our wonderful hosts, the Virginia Aquarium. We have private industries like Trex and the American Chemistry Council. We have a litter prevention and recycling fund, We have the Coastal Zone Management Program and Virginia Sea Grant that excel at building successful partnerships and have some funding to develop and begin implementation of a plan.

We have NOAA and EPA here - ready and willing to help. And we have our academic colleagues at VIMS and VCU.



Our work today and tomorrow is to build on these assets and draft a plan for Virginia that strengthens our capacity to effect change. This is a big problem that requires coordination among government agencies, schools, businesses, nonprofits organizations, commercial and recreational fishermen, boaters, marinas – all of us working together.

This summit will focus on answers – solutions. How can we control solid waste and keep it from becoming marine debris? The answers are in solid waste management, stormwater management, education and outreach that lead to real behavior change, and best management practices on a wide range of items from fast food containers to how we fish or catch crabs to dealing with storm debris.

Like other forms of pollution, prevention pays – it is far less expensive to prevent the problem.

Thank You!!



Thank you for all your efforts today and tomorrow. And thank you for coming and for inviting me to participate. And let's get out there and get it done!