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Florida Universities Team Up to Help Governments Cope With Oil Spill By Paul Basken

As oil from an exploded underwater rig mucks up and menaces shorelines all along the Gulf of Mexico, the governor of Florida, Charlie Crist, is among those trying to guess when and how badly the spill will foul his state's 1,200-mile coast.

Just four blocks west of the Capitol in Tallahassee, at Florida State University, researchers are working in a federal collaborative that already has extensive experience in tracking the ocean currents that now carry that oil. Soon, the governor and the scientists could become much better acquainted.

Sensing that government officials may not always know where to turn for help, Florida State and other universities have been scrambling this week to pull together a coalition called the Oil Spill Academic Task Force, composed of regional scientists talented in all aspects of coping with such an environmental disaster.

Oceanographers Set Adrift

"It's essentially a clearinghouse for making the outside world aware of the capabilities that we have," said W. Ross Ellington, the associate vice president for research at Florida State who is coordinating the effort. Ironically, those capabilities seem diminished from last year, when the university decided, in the face of state budget cuts, to break up its oceanography department. It laid off five professors in what had been a 15-person department.

The university let go of such scientists as Brian K. Arbic, an assistant professor, who is leaving at the end of the month for a new job at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. He is part of the federal collaborative that maps ocean currents. Information from that collaborative, known as the Hybrid Coordinate Ocean Model, or Hycom, helps guide the U.S. Navy as it moves its ships around the world, Mr. Arbic said.

That kind of know-how could be especially valuable to state and local governments all along the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic coasts in coming weeks as they make preparations for the environmental and economic effects of the oil washing up on their shores, he said.

"Charlie Crist, the Florida governor, doesn't necessarily know about Hycom, so they're putting themselves out there," Mr. Arbic said.

The governor, who has publicly admitted many uncertainties about the direction and scale of the oil spill, is far from alone. More than two weeks after the April 20 accident at the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, even its operator, British Petroleum, isn't giving firm numbers on how much oil is flowing into the Gulf.

Government officials consulting with BP initially estimated a loss of 1,000 to 5,000 barrels of oil a day. U.S. Rep. Edward J. Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts, who met Tuesday with industry officials, said the company now suspected a range of 40,000 to 60,000 barrels a day.

The new estimates may only increase the importance of work such as that planned by Michael S. Wetz, an assistant professor of oceanography at Florida State and another casualty of last year's layoffs. He is studying water quality and plankton populations in the estuaries of the north Florida coast, which produce 10 percent of the nation's oysters.

A Rush to Do More Research

After the Deepwater Horizon oil-rig explosion, Mr. Wetz made plans to hurry out last week and collect samples from the coastline before the oil reached it, so he would be able to make later comparisons of water quality and biological conditions.

Mr. Wetz, who was laid off only six months after being hired at the university, will be leaving in a few months to take a new job in Texas, which he said leaves "no one with my expertise in this part of Florida."

Mr. Arbic said that he was among the professors who urged university administrators to consider the institution's overall public mission when deciding whether it was worth the cost of keeping the oceanography department.

Other institutions joining Florida State in the regional oil-spill panel are the Florida Institute of Technology; Florida Agricultural and Mechanical, Florida Atlantic, Florida International, and Nova Southeastern Universities; and the Universities of Central Florida, Florida, Miami, North Florida, South Florida and West Florida.

The dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Florida State, Joseph Travis, said that despite the faculty losses at his university, the group of professors assembled for the panel is "very strong." It is not clear, Mr. Travis said, referring to the budget cutbacks, "how decisions made last year have any relevance to the present situation."