

Higher Ed's Help with Oil Spill Response

Since the BP Deepwater Horizon rig explosion on April 20, engineers and scientists from colleges and universities across the country have been getting their hands dirty with the Gulf Coast oil spill. They continue to give their time and expertise toward tracking the leak, developing cleanup methods, and monitoring the consequential damage on the region's ecosystem. Here is a sample of various institutional efforts.

Conducting Research

About 14 scientists from The Institute of Environmental and Human Health at Texas Tech University have been collecting oil samples along the coast to for toxicology tests to determine the direction of oil is spreading and how organisms are responding to it, according to Director Ron Kendall. [Crude Survival](#), a web-based journal, catalogs their efforts and acts as a media resource center. The institute is also working with the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A & M University-Kingsville to conduct surveillance of rookeries (breeding grounds for birds) and determine how vulnerable they are to contact with oil.

At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, researchers from the College of Arts and Sciences have been examining microbes present in the Gulf's waters to see how they might be helpful in cleaning up the oil.

In mid-June, two University of Iowa students and a UI engineering professor visited Louisiana for five days to see how to treat marshlands that have been heavily affected by the spill. The team is studying how much oil the coast's salt marsh can withstand before the vegetation dies and also will examine how to best speed up the wetlands' recovery should it die.

Marty Matlock, professor of ecological engineering at the University of Arkansas, has been working with a group of students to assess environmental damage and ultimately to develop recommendations for coastal wetlands restoration.

Three University of Connecticut scientists were among a select group of researchers convening at Louisiana State University in early June in an emergency meeting to assess the spill's environmental impact. They had also contributed in science-based efforts. Professor James O'Donnell, a physical oceanographer, helped to develop tools for the Coast Guard and NOAA to predict how the oil will be distributed at the ocean surface. Associate professor and chemist Penny Vlahos created a method for testing the oil's chemical makeup in water samples.

Texas A&M University atmospheric science researcher Don Conlee and a group of students are taking air samples with a series of weather balloon tests in conjunction with the National Weather Service. The group was asked by the NWS to develop procedures and examine feasibility of weather balloon observations in the vicinity of the spill site. The weather balloon launches will help improve the operational forecasting efforts of the weather service.



Getting Information Out

Higher ed institutions along the Gulf have been providing web-based information to keep the public up to date on information and efforts. Mississippi State University Extension Service's website, [MSUCares.com](#), has a section listing research-based information on disaster preparedness and response initiatives. Tulane University (La.) students in a Geographic Information Systems class used open source software to develop an [Oil Spill Crisis Map](#) for displaying the impact of and the response to the crisis with reports from ordinary citizens. Folks can send in tips by text message, e-mail, and Twitter.

Course Subject

On campus, instructors are bringing the issue to their classrooms. The University of Minnesota will offer a fall course called "Oil and Water: The Gulf Oil Spill of 2010" centering on the Gulf's history and ecology, the makeup of the Louisiana economy, and the impact of past oil spills. The topic is also being discussed in economics, biology, and psychology courses at Harper College (Ill.).

Institutions can send their examples to Associate Editor Michele Herrmann at mherrmann@universitybusiness.com.



Posted by Michele Herrmann on July 14, 2010 in [News](#) | [Resources](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Technorati Tags: [BP](#), [Gulf Coast oil spill](#), [Harper College](#), [Louisiana State University](#), [Mississippi State University Extension Service](#), [Texas A & M University-Kingsville](#), [Texas A&M University](#), [Texas Tech University](#), [Tulane University](#), [University of Arkansas](#), [University of Connecticut](#), [University of Iowa](#), [University of Minnesota](#), [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#)
[Email this post](#)

