

Gold rush on the Gulf: Researchers clamor for cash

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This undated handout photo provided by BP, shows a Wave Glider, a new type of robotic boat measuring water quality and doing scientific research for BP. It is satellite controlled, gets its propulsion power from wave action, and uses solar power to run its scientific electronics. (AP Photo/BP)

(AP) -- Once a backwater in the world of oceanographic research, the Gulf of Mexico has suddenly become the site of a scientific gold rush, all because of the BP oil spill.

The environmental disaster represents a once-in-a-generation research opportunity that has oceanographers salivating. There's big money - \$500 million from BP alone - up for grabs. And for scientists who usually toil in near-obscure, there's the prospect of lots of media attention.

Researchers are suddenly in demand, with more than 100 hired guns on the job. BP has signed up nearly 50 scientists to help defend it from legal action. The federal government has its paid experts, and so do attorneys suing BP. Environmental activists have their own research vessels and scientists.

At least 165 proposed studies are registered through a federal clearinghouse. Some crucial supplies - such as boats - are hard to find.

"We've never had this many research vessels concentrated in the Gulf at any one time - never," said Larry McKinney, director of [Gulf of Mexico](#) studies at Texas A&M University in Corpus Christi. "It's been a flat-out crazy time."

To try to bring order to what's going on, scientists studying the spill from around the country will gather in Florida on Oct. 5 at the request of the White House science office to talk about coordination and priorities. Also in the next week or so, Gulf states are expected to complete an agreement on how to hand out the \$500 million in BP-pledged research money over the next decade.

The Gulf of Mexico has gotten relatively little federal research support in the past. In the 20 years before the oil spill, the Great Lakes received more than \$1 billion, while the Chesapeake Bay got just shy of half a billion. Spending for the same time period on the much-larger Gulf of Mexico: \$85 million.

"It's the hardest working of our ocean basins, but it's the most underfunded in terms of research monitoring and science," said Florida State University oceanographer Ian MacDonald.

That's changing because of the worst offshore oil spill in U.S. history.

Hour after hour on a hot and windy September day, biologist Eric Hoffmayer bounced over choppy Gulf waters in a fishing boat, hunting for whale sharks - one species among many that scientists are studying to measure how the spill has affected people and the environment.

Hoffmayer, of the University of Southern Mississippi's Gulf Coast Research Laboratory, is among the fortunate scholars who have snagged funding. He has had more luck landing money than whale sharks, at least on this outing, when none turned up.

"There's multiple sources of funding out there. You just have to know how to tap into it," Hoffmayer said.

Two major types of research are taking place, and they often get confused by the public.

One involves basic inquiries into questions such as where the oil has gone and what it means for the ecosystem, food web and public health. That is where BP has pledged to spend a half-billion dollars, with all findings to be made publicly available.

The other type of research supports the federal government's natural resource damage assessment, or NRDA, a part of the legal battle that eventually will determine how much money BP will pay for restoration.

In the NRDA process, both sides have hired experts and pledged them to secrecy.

"It is standard practice to ask such a litigation expert to maintain the confidentiality of communications with legal counsel," BP spokesman Tom Mueller wrote in an e-mail.

Likewise, the government may keep some data in this process secret,

said Steve Murawski, chief fisheries scientist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. NOAA has 17 damage assessment teams working the spill, he said.

Under the 1990 oil spill law written after the Exxon Valdez disaster, both sides hire scientists, economists and attorneys and collect data in a legal process designed to "make the public whole" for loss of natural resources. Billions of dollars are at stake with court fights likely to go on for years.

But that's only a fraction of the research that's going on, scientists said. It's the general research money - including BP's half-billion - that most are seeking. The only stipulation from BP is "the data is shared publicly when the results are in," Mueller said. Researchers and deans at several universities confirmed this.

"At one point I was sorely tempted to give the money back because frankly I didn't want the sea lab associated with BP money," said Dauphin Island Sea Lab director George Crozier. But when he saw there were no strings, he accepted the money.

So far, \$40 million of it has been given to four large academic institutions in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida and the National Institutes of Health, which then divided it among dozens of [researchers](#). In Florida, 233 proposals competed for \$10 million in grants with only 27 getting funded.

The Gulf of Mexico Alliance, a consortium of state officials, is setting up a more permanent process for distributing the remaining \$460 million from BP.

Some say still more is needed.

"I don't think \$50 million a year is enough to study the problem as we know the scope of it," NOAA's Murawski said.

Environmental groups are getting into the act. Greenpeace dispatched its 164-foot research ship Arctic Sunrise for a three-month tour of the Gulf, where it is hosting university scientists for a variety of spill-related studies and collecting water samples.

The funding scramble has created a geographical rift. Scientists in the Gulf region contend they should get most of the money because they know the area better and have been shortchanged in the past. Those from elsewhere say grants should be awarded on the basis of researchers' credentials and the worthiness of their study proposals.

"It's in our backyard," said William Hawkins, director of Southern Mississippi's Gulf Coast lab. Many scientists in Gulf states believe "this is our time, this is our spill," he added.

There's a sense of urgency behind the push for funding. Ideally, scientists would have taken measurements before, during and after the spill to see how the ecosystem changed. Their efforts were hampered for months by a shortage of vessels and poor access to the spill area as the government and BP focused on plugging the leak.

Now, the oil is becoming harder to find with each passing day.

Chris D'Elia, dean of Louisiana State University's School of the Coast and the Environment, said: "This is like trying to do forensic work on a very old crime scene - the murder occurred months ago, the body's decayed and animals walked off with the rest."

More information: NOAA's oil spill science missions home page:
<http://tinyurl.com/noaabpstudies>

Sea Grant program's overall database of oil spill research:

<http://tinyurl.com/gomstudies>

BP's Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative: <http://tinyurl.com/25h5olk>

Interior Dept.'s Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Program <http://restoration.doi.gov>

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