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Florida Centers of Excellence Research Grant Program awards funds for Gulf research

St. Petersburg, Fla. – August 21, 2015 – Ten projects to improve the health of the Gulf and fortify its ecosystems has been funded by the U.S. Treasury Department from Deepwater Horizon oil spill penalties. The Florida Institute of Oceanography (FIO) announces specific proposals focused on coastal and oceanic fish and wildlife research and monitoring. The FIO-led Florida RESTORE Act Centers of Excellence Program (FLRACEP) selected projects that will best manage and sustain the natural resources that are the foundation to Florida's economy.

As an original sponsor of the RESTORE Act, Senator Nelson stated, "I am pleased that Florida's natural resources are finally receiving RESTORE Act funding to help restore and build our natural resources. As evidenced by our stated intent to have FIO host the Centers of Excellence program, I am confident that FIO and its university partners will help us learn about the oil spill's environmental and economic impacts, which may go on for many more years."

In 2013, the RESTORE Act passed with FIO designated as the Florida entity to receive the funds to establish Florida's Centers of Excellence Research Grants Program in support of science, technology development and education related to the 2010 Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. The Act highlighted the need to engage institutions of higher education in Gulf-wide recovery.

Representative Kathy Castor observed, "One of my overriding goals following the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster is to ensure that the Gulf of Mexico is restored environmentally and economically. Today, Florida researchers and scientists will be awarded the first research funds provided under the RESTORE Act in which I helped secure dedicated funding for the new Florida marine science "Centers of Excellence". The Florida Institute of Oceanography, located at USF St. Pete and its world-class College of Marine Sciences, will lead our once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to restore the environmental and economic vitality of the Gulf of Mexico by providing the science and engineering expertise required for successful restoration. I am thrilled to see our vision for the Florida marine science "Centers for Excellence" come to fruition."

Treasury regulations for the RESTORE Act were finalized in October 2014 enabling FIO to begin implementing the program using funds from Transocean's settlement in 2012. This began with a public scoping process to identify program priorities, followed by a recently completed expert peer review process to select the first Centers of Excellence to be funded.

The Program Management Team approved the 10 projects below to be funded for 2 years at eight Centers of Excellence at Florida.

Funded activities include:

Principal Investigator, Center of Excellence Institution	Grant Title
Mike Allen, University of Florida	Improving observations and models to reduce Lionfish in the Northern Gulf
Jerry Ault, University of Miami	Optimizing economic value and sustainability of recreational Florida fisheries
Beth Babcock, University of Miami	Better use of directly-observed data in ecosystem simulation models
Kevin Boswell, FL International University	Informing fishery-independent reef fish surveys through advanced survey techniques
Jane Caffrey, University of West FL	Evaluating the role of artificial reefs as hotspots of biological productivity
Dean Grubbs, FL State University	Study will examine long-term effects of DwH on large deep-sea fishes
Chad Lembke, University of South FL	Robotic monitoring of Red Grouper in the Eastern GoM
Kate Mansfield, University of Central FL	Tracking sea turtle “lost years” in the Gulf of Mexico
Ernst Peebles, University of South FL	Egg and larval DNA barcoding support Gulf reef fish stock assessments
Brian Walker, NOVA Southeastern University	Develop habitat maps for surveys, management strategies, and climate change research

For details on the RESTORE Act, FLRACEP rules and policies, and the new Centers of Excellence, visit FIO’s web site: <http://www.fio.usf.edu/research/restore-act>.

About FIO: The [Florida Institute of Oceanography](#) is a consortium of 30 public and private academic institutions, research laboratories and agencies from across the State of Florida working collaboratively to support Excellence in Science, Technology and Educational Resources. FIO is hosted by the University of South Florida at the College of Marine Science and is home ported in St. Petersburg, Florida.