

Money from BP fine pays for research into health of gulf

By [Kate Bradshaw](#)



Associated Press File Photos

A sea bird is mired in oil on the beach at East Grand Terre Island along the Louisiana coast in this June 3, 2010, photo. Oil from the Deepwater Horizon affected wildlife throughout the five states bordering the Gulf of Mexico.

MADEIRA BEACH — The oil gusher that wreaked environmental and economic havoc on the Gulf Coast in 2010 may be only a memory to most, but researchers still are studying its impacts with the help of money from fines from the companies that caused it.

On Thursday, the Florida Institute of Oceanography will hold a public forum to discuss new funding for research on the health of the gulf. The first of three meetings in the state, it is meant to glean input from members of the public — whether environmentalists, coastal hoteliers, fishing people or beach lovers.

Cathy Harrelson, Florida director of the Gulf Restoration Network, an environmental nonprofit group, plans to tell FIO members about gaps she sees in scientists' understanding of the gulf since the BP oil spill.

“We all know that one of the issues when BP happened was the baseline of research was very limited and that’s created a problem in terms of setting definitive restoration targets,” she said.

The FIO is a consortium of scientists from universities and other institutions that formed in 2010, not long after the deepwater oil rig blowout sent millions of gallons of oil into the gulf. It is one of five organizations — one in each of the gulf states — charged with handling the money collected in fines according to the Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act.

The money collected from BP and Transocean for violating the Clean Water Act is expected to be in the billions. The bulk of it is going into a trust fund dedicated to environmental restoration efforts, and a small amount is going

toward research.

The available money, which comes from a billion-dollar fine levied on Transocean, the company that owned the Deepwater Horizon drill ship, is estimated at \$4 million per state.

Harrelson said she would like it to fund research on coastal and deepwater ecosystems, as well as the economic impact of preserving pristine environments. She also said she would like to see more research on the climate change impact on the gulf through things like sea-level rise and ocean acidification. She said it's important to understand how the gulf is changing and whether those changes might have a multiplier effect on the impact made by the oil and dispersants.

"It is all fossil fuel related," Harrelson said. "If we don't continue to keep that at the forefront of our discussion then policies will never change."

Scientific findings, once made public, potentially could change policy, though Harrelson said she is concerned that, given how climate change and oil are politicized, some lawmakers won't pay attention.

"In a perfect world where politicians stop throwing up their hands and say, 'I'm not a scientist,' ideally one would be able to make those connections," Harrelson said. "Policymakers should look at (the science) and make decisions and make plans based on that."

The forum is 6:30-8:30 p.m. at Madeira Beach City Hall Auditorium, 300 Municipal Drive. Those unable to attend may weigh-in through a survey on FIO's Web site, fio.usf.edu.

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