



GULF OF MEXICO RESEARCH INITIATIVE RESEARCH BOARD

Prepared Testimony:

**Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative Research Board
Dr. Margaret S. Leinen, Vice Chairman, on behalf of Dr. Rita R. Colwell, Chairman**

For:

**Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works
Subcommittee on Water and Wildlife**

Hearing:

Status of the Deepwater Horizon Natural Resource Damage Assessment

June 28, 2011

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the work of the Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative.

My name is Dr. Margaret S. Leinen and I am Vice Chairman of the Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative Research Board. I am also the Associate Provost for Marine and Environmental Initiatives at Florida Atlantic University and the Executive Director of Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute in Florida. Today, I would like to present remarks prepared by Dr. Rita R. Colwell, Chairman of the Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative Research Board.

About the Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative

In May 2010, BP committed \$500 million over a 10-year period to create an independent research program to study the impacts of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on the Gulf of Mexico. The program, known as the Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative, or GRI, is directed by an independent Research Board.

The Research Board is responsible for identifying research priorities, preparing requests for proposals, enabling an open and transparent peer-review process, selecting proposals for funding, and reviewing annual progress for continuation of funding.

Although the GRI was announced in 2010, it was not until March 14, 2011 that the Master Research Agreement was signed. The Master Research Agreement between BP and the Gulf of Mexico Alliance provides the operational structure for the GRI.

As stated in the Master Research Agreement, “The GRI is an independent scientific research program and is separate from the Natural Resources Damages Assessment process, and BP

agrees that the participation of the Alliance in this agreement shall not result in a credit against or defense to any claims for natural resource damages or assessment costs.”

The objectives of the GRI are to investigate the impacts of the oil, dispersed oil, and dispersant on the ecosystems of the Gulf of Mexico and affected Gulf Coastal States in a broad context of improving fundamental understanding of the dynamics of such events, the associated environmental stresses, and the public health implications. The GRI will also support the development of improved spill mitigation, oil and gas detection, characterization, and remediation technologies.

Ultimately, the goal of the GRI is to improve society’s ability to understand and respond to the impacts of petroleum pollution and related stressors of the marine and coastal ecosystems, with an emphasis on conditions in the Gulf of Mexico.

Achieving the Goal

The GRI has established and is implementing peer-reviewed, competitive grant programs that will support research that advances our understanding in the following five areas.

1. Physical distribution, dispersion, and dilution of petroleum, its constituents, and associated contaminants, such as dispersants, under the action of physical oceanographic processes, air–sea interactions, and tropical storms.
2. Chemical evolution and biological degradation of the petroleum/dispersant systems and subsequent interaction with coastal, open-ocean, and deep-water ecosystems.
3. Environmental effects of the petroleum/dispersant system on the sea floor, water column, coastal waters, beach sediments, wetlands, marshes, and organisms; and the science of ecosystem recovery.
4. Technology developments for improved response, mitigation, detection, characterization, and remediation associated with oil spills and gas releases.
5. Fundamental scientific research integrating results from the other four themes in the context of public health.

The Research Board has released two requests for proposals, RFP-I and RFP-III. The Research Board anticipates issuing another request for proposals, RFP-II, later this year.

Proposals received in response to these RFPs will be evaluated in a manner similar to that used by the National Science Foundation.

RFP-I

On April 25, 2011, the GRI announced the release of RFP-I. Through this program, a minimum of \$37.5 million per year will fund approximately four to eight Research Consortia to study the

effects of the Deepwater Horizon incident on the Gulf of Mexico. It is anticipated that each grant will be for up to three years and will range between \$1 million and \$7.5 million per year. The research that will be conducted through these Consortia must address one or more of the five areas previously described.

A Consortium will involve four or more universities, institutions, or independent organizations. A Research Consortia shall consist of research institutions in the Gulf Coast States, provided that institutions outside of the Gulf Coast States may be members of or participate in partnerships with such Consortia.

Proposals for RFP-I funding are being accepted until July 11th. The Research Board anticipates announcing the funded Consortia on August 30th.

RFP-II

The Research Board has identified a need to fund smaller research teams. Thus, a second grant program, RFP-II, is being developed. This effort will award grants that focus on activities involving less money and less internal management than a Research Consortia. These grants will fund efforts involving a principal investigator, but may include co-principal investigators from up to three additional institutions. This research will focus on the same five themes described in RFP-I. A maximum of \$7.5 million per year will be available for RFP-II grants.

RFP-III

Earlier this year, the Research Board recognized the need to provide short-term or emergency funding to sustain some data collection efforts this summer. Thus, on June 7th, the GRI announced the availability of funds under a new grant program, RFP-III. One might think of RFP-III as “emergency funding.” The Research Board will conduct expedited review and allocation of grant funding to support the acquisition of samples and critical observations. RFP-III will provide support for sampling from July 1 to September 30, 2011.

Applications for funding under RFP-III were accepted until June 17, 2011. The Research Board is in the process of reviewing these applications and we anticipate announcing the funding decisions this week. Roughly \$1.5 million will be provided under this program.

Conclusion

The GRI supports research that contributes to our understanding of how the Gulf of Mexico was influenced by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and how this rich and dynamic environmental system is recovering. This information will undoubtedly be useful and informative to the Natural Resources Damage Assessment program. The GRI is expected to provide valuable insight from the long term analysis of the ecological system of the Gulf of Mexico.