How does coastal work affect food chain?

A team that includes local researchers wants to know

By Keith Magill

Executive Editor

A Terrebonne Parish marine research center is among partners that will use about $2 million in fines from the BP oil spill to study how coastal restoration work impacts the food chain in wetlands across south Louisiana.

A team that includes the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium in Cocodrie is among 15 groups that have received $16 million combined to do research on the 2010 oil spill's impact along the Gulf Coast.

“Little is known about how river diversions impact plants, animals and their interactions with each other in natural and man-made coastal marshes,” Michael Polito, assistant professor in LSU's Department of Oceanography and Coastal Sciences, said in a news release. “Our work aims to increase the understanding of the marsh ecosystem so that coastal land managers will have more information and a more complete picture when making management decisions.”

Aside from LUMCON and LSU, the team includes researchers from Rutgers University, the University of Florida, the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and Michigan Technological University.

“There is a wealth of knowledge and expertise here among Gulf of Mexico research institutions,' said co-principal investigator Nancy Rabalais, Shell Oil Endowed Chair in Wetland Sciences at LSU and LUMCON Distinguished Research Professor. “With support from this federally funded science program, we can continue to delve deep into research of the Gulf, which is a critical U.S. natural resource.”

The research comes as the state launches major projects as part of a $50 billion, 50-year plan to save coastal communities such as Terrebonne and Lafourche from inundation. Since 1932, Louisiana has lost 2,000 square miles of coastal marshes and wetlands, an area nearly the size of Delaware. Causes include erosion, sinking land, hurricanes, oilfield activity and levees that rob coastal marshes of the Mississippi River sediment that once nourished them.

The scientists will study the impact common methods used to restore

coastal wetlands have on the food chain that supports fish and wildlife.

Overall, the teams selected for the latest round of grants come from 37 institutions, almost all along the Gulf Coast, including universities, federal and state agencies and coastal advocacy groups. TheNational Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration selected the teams and their projects, which will run for up to three years, after accepting competitive proposals that were reviewed by a panel of outside experts.

Their studies will focus on a wide range of issues, including red snapper management, oyster production, preserving coastal wetlands amid development and the impact the oil spill had on the tiniest creatures at the bottom of the Gulf food chain.

The money comes via the RESTORE Act, passed by Congress in 2012. About 2.5 percent of the fines paid by BP and other companies deemed responsible for the oil spill go to the science program for Gulf Coast research. NOAA will distribute about $133 million for the program over the next 16 years.

“We spoke with Gulf resource managers and asked what they needed to make decisions on sustaining and restoring living coastal and marine resources in the region,” said Julien Lartigue, director of the NOAA RESTORE Science Program. “These projects will have a measurable effect on our understanding of finfish, shellfish and other important species in the Gulf.”