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June 2, 2010

MEMORANDUM

TO: Vice-Presidents/Vice-Chancellors for Research

FROM: Kerry Davidson, Deputy Commissioner for Sponsored Programs

Michael Khonsari, EPSCoR Project Director

RE: Proposal for a Prospective Gulf Oil Spill Research Conference

Inspired by the Post-Katrina research conference in 2006, we have considered prospects for a joint Louisiana Board of Regents/EPSCoR Gulf oil spill research conference to address the breadth of scientific, technical and other issues raised by the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

Funding for the conference will be sought from both the National Science Foundation (NSF) and British Petroleum (BP). Based on a two-page white paper (attached), which Michael Khonsari recently submitted to the NSF EPSCoR Office, Louisiana has been invited to speedily submit a full, though brief, proposal. A corollary request to BP for matching funds is underway. If only NSF dollars are awarded, plans are for a one-and-a-half-day conference; if both NSF and BP dollars are awarded, plans are for a two-and-a-half-day conference. If funding is obtained, a steering committee will be quickly established, to include VPs for Research or their designees, and representatives from EPSCoR programs in Mississippi and Alabama.

To make certain that the proposal and the prospective conference reflect informed insights, we encourage interested parties to offer suggestions related to: (a) the content of the proposal; and (b) the organization, themes, and desired outcomes of the conference. Please share this request with others on your campus who may be interested in responding.

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It is imperative that the proposal be developed quickly. Accordingly, please submit your ideas to Carrie Robison via email (carrie.robison@la.gov) by close of business on June 7, 2010.

If you have questions, please contact Kerry Davidson (kerry.davidson@la.gov), or Michael Khonsari (michael.khonsari@la.gov).

ATTACHMENT

The Gulf Oil Leak and Its Impact on Science and Technology Research: Better Science for Better Policy

Context: The British Petroleum oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico poses unprecedented challenges for the Gulf region that will endure for generations. Even a month after the explosion that sank the Deepwater Horizon rig, there are many more questions than answers about a host of scientific issues: What caused the explosion? How much oil is hemorrhaging from the broken pipes? Why did the fail-safe blowout preventer fail to deploy? What impact will deep water spraying of chemical dispersants have on the fragile Gulf ecosystem? How can oil be best kept out of coastal wetlands? How can these wetlands and their wildlife be saved if and when oil penetrates the defenses? Will the oil enter the loop current and, if it does, what environmental impacts will it have on the shorelines and marine ecosystems beyond the Gulf? These and myriad other questions will drive scientific research for decades, but answers need to start flowing now. As important, too, the Gulf leak and its aftereffects will likely shape public policy related to such diverse issues as energy development, environmental and endangered species protection, drilling permitting and safety, wetlands redevelopment, and corporate liability for man-made disasters. Scientific research should play a major role in shaping such policy, by providing information about and understanding of the disaster and its ramifications for ecosystems, communities, economies, and natural resource development.

Proposed Conference: Researchers nationally and worldwide, using both focused and synergistic approaches, stand ready to study impacts of the oil spill on the complex ecosystem of the Gulf and potentially beyond. Louisiana EPSCoR and the Louisiana Board of Regents jointly propose to host a two-day conference, including researchers from across the country who are leaders in areas of study critical to the Gulf's recovery. National and international experts will be invited to provide keynote and plenary sessions, as well as serve on conference panels. In addition, breakout sessions, led by program officers from federal agencies, will offer researchers information about research funding opportunities. Such a diverse and inclusive event would be a powerful mechanism to bring together researchers, public-sector agents, private-sector partners, and other stakeholders who represent a full spectrum of scientific questions and approaches. We anticipate the cost of the conference will be approximately \$100,000.

Steering Committee: The conference would be organized by a diverse steering committee with representation from universities, government agencies, and industry invested in issues related to the oil leak. Louisiana EPSCoR and Board of Regents staff will coordinate the work of the steering committee and make all arrangements for the conference.

Urgency of Rapid Response: The Gulf disaster is evolving on a daily, even hourly basis. As it continues to unfold, the desperate need for immediate and long-range action and study is increasingly evident. We need to mobilize and organize scientific and technical talent without delay. Depending on the availability of funds, we are able to mount a full conference at a site along the Gulf Coast in September 2010. Louisiana will begin work immediately to host the conference in this abbreviated timeframe.

Conference Goals

- To focus attention on the myriad research and policy questions, many specific to the Gulf region, raised by the Deepwater Horizon disaster
- To raise awareness of current and potential scientific contributions to remediation and recovery efforts
- To provide a venue for policy-makers, industry representatives, and researchers to share ideas and make connections
- To make researchers aware of funding opportunities for Gulf-related projects
- To bring researchers in related fields together in a collaborative environment

Benefits: The Deepwater Horizon disaster is not only unparalleled in scope, its effects touch areas from basic biological sciences to the deep-water drilling technologies. The questions it raises will be with us and drive scientific research for generations. The need to develop a holistic picture of the disaster and the resources and knowledge essential to repair the damage to the environment as well as safely continue natural resource development is acute. This conference would begin these critical discussions. The effects of this conference also stretch far beyond the shores of the Gulf. The depletion of easily accessible oil and gas resources are driving us to tap more elusive and dangerous areas, increasing the potential for other disasters similar to the Deepwater Horizon. The global nature of oil exploration and production makes it likely that the lessons learned on the Gulf will be crucial to solving problems of an international scale. Finally, bringing scientists together with the policy-makers and private-sector representatives, often the end-users of research findings, will yield vital discussions of the role of scientific research in solving these kinds of catastrophic problems and in developing public policy toward high-tech, sometimes high-risk private industrial activities.

Evaluation: Assessment will include surveys of participants immediately following the meeting and three to six months afterwards. These will measure:

- The extent to which the goals of the conference have been achieved
- Collaborations proposed/established among scientists, industrial partners, etc.
- Development/implementation of large-scale activities and research efforts
- Involvement of participants in policy discussions
- Participants' research funding potential: sources identified, proposals submitted

Further Opportunities for Support: We anticipate that the response to conference issues from EPSCoR researchers will be monumental, and conference-inspired research activities and partnerships would lend themselves to rapid response and funding. This is an excellent opportunity to immediately activate research partnerships and activities initiated through the conference. If made available, additional support from NSF EPSCoR could be used for early-stage research and development funding, graduate student research, and coordination of large-scale planning efforts.