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Ensuring Nuclear Energy and Carbon Constrained Technologies for Electric Power in Florida

Exploiting Florida's Ocean and Wind Energy Resources

Securing our Energy Storage and Delivery Infrastructure

Power Generation Expansion

Establishing PV Industry in Florida

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- Spill** 2
- Trajectories** 2
- Portal** 2
- Microalgae** 3
- Technology** 3
- icEME** 3
- Solar** 3
- Carbon** 4

FESC Researches Gulf Oil Spill

Ocean Expert Weisberg Testifies on Gulf Oil Spill Science Shortcomings

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WASHINGTON (June 15, 2010) – Robert Weisberg, a USF Distinguished Professor of physical oceanography, testified Tuesday before the U.S. House of Representatives on gaps in the nation's scientific capabilities to respond to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill crisis, calling for greater cooperation among agencies in sharing of scientific data that would expand scientists' capabilities to monitor the spill and its effects.

Weisberg, whose advanced modeling systems have allowed officials to track the oil's movement through the Gulf and led fellow researchers to find vast underwater clouds of oil in the depths of the gulf, testified before the House Natural Resource Committee's Subcommittee On Insular Affairs, Oceans And Wildlife. The subcommittee called the hearing on the question: "Ocean Science and Data Limits in a Time of Crisis: Do NOAA and the Fish and Wildlife Service Have the Resources to Respond?"

Weisberg is one of the world's leading ocean circulation experts and models created by

USF's Ocean Circulation Group have been watched worldwide as more than 1.7 million gallons of oil have poured into the gulf each day since the April 20 well explosion.

He told members of Congress that academic scientists might have had greater capabilities to track the spill and the large underwater clouds of degraded oil had ocean monitoring systems not been cut in recent years. Furthermore, there needs to be a greater exchange of information between government agencies and marine scientists to allow those who have developed specific systems which can be used to track the spill be more effective.

Of particular concern, Weisberg said, is the subsurface oil clouds - more commonly known as plumes. Last month, USF College of Marine Science researchers followed Weisberg's models to an area northeast of the ruptured wellhead where they discovered large areas of degraded oil suspended more than a quarter-mile down.

"Ocean circulation and the whole organization of ecology

is a three-dimensional problem," Weisberg told the subcommittee. "We know the region of the continental shelf break, where the depth drops into the abyss, is sensitive for our reef fish. If there are contaminants in high levels to impact those communities, we need to know about it.

"The worst thing we can do is wipe out the fundamental habitat of our reef fish. Just because we can't see it doesn't mean it's not a threat. It may be a worse threat than what we can see." Responding to questions from Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Palm Harbor, regarding the exchange of data between government agencies and academic scientists, Weisberg said there are data gaps which are hampering a more complete understanding of the spill.

Continued page 2 "Spill"

