

Water Institute Distinguished Scholar Seminar Series

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Thursday, January 13, 2011
3:00 PM – 4:00 PM
282 J. Wayne Reitz Union

Title:

How to Restore a Damaged Ecosystem after an Unprecedented Oil Spill

Abstract:

The BP Deepwater Horizon disaster was an engineering failure that brought the attention of the world to the northern Gulf of Mexico. The oil gusher (not a leak, not a spill, not an incident) was an immediate environmental insult, and as yet unknown short- and long-term impact. The damage assessment of the oil on ecosystems identified immediately effects on certain habitats but other effects are more elusive given the nature of the spill and limited knowledge of deeper ecosystems and oceanic communities. While researchers primed for continued research on impacts and recovery, the formal process of assessment, post-spill reconnaissance and hostaged BP research funds stymied effective studies and many opportunities were lost. With the spill also came attention to the fragile and already-damaged condition of the northern Gulf of Mexico. The area bears marks from decades of extensive oil and gas production and a nutrient-polluted Mississippi River that yields a world-class “dead zone” in the Gulf every spring and summer. Yet, we are now challenged with a Presidential Executive Order that calls for an integration of Federal efforts with those of local stakeholders to initiate and pursue complex, large-scale restoration projects in a Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Plan. Billions of dollars should become available for restoration making the process an excellent opportunity to properly understand, manage and conserve the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem. Will we meet the challenge?