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Harte Research Institute aims to create Gulf of Mexico 'report card'



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO Carlota Santos (right), a research specialist at Texas A&M University Corpus Christi's Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies, surveys visitors at the Mission Aransas National Estuarine Research Reserve to learn who visits the area and how these visitors, whether local or vacationers, value local ecosystem services.

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By *Beatriz Alvarado* of the *Caller Times*

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CONTRIBUTED PHOTO Larry McKinney, director of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi's Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies, will lead a team of six co-investigators in laying the foundation to create the first report card on the Gulf of Mexico.

As billions are being invested in restoring the Gulf of Mexico after the 2010 BP oil spill, a report card to assess the efforts is in the works at the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

The research is funded by a portion of Clean Water Act fines collected after the spill. The institute was one of seven research teams awarded federal money in September and will assemble key players in March



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
 Researchers from the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and partner agencies will test methods of evaluating the ecological health of ecosystems at Mission-Aransas National Estuarine Research Reserve to expand the assessment framework to other parts of the Gulf of Mexico.



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said one of the six co-investigators to lead the project, director of Mission-Aransas National Estuarine Research Reserve Jace Tunnell.

Researchers will test their methods at the research reserve, a 185,708-acre complex of Texas marine, wetland and coastal environments and will evaluate the potential for broad use in the Gulf of Mexico. The framework will be

to execute the first phase of a two-year project — dubbed "Indicators and Assessment Framework for Ecological Health and Ecosystem Services."

The institute was awarded \$398,349 and is tasked with developing a framework to objectively evaluate the health of the Gulf and its ties to the well-being of coastal residents. The project will help federal, state and local agencies and nongovernmental organizations focus federal resources more effectively.

Larry McKinney, the institute's executive director, will lead a team of six co-investigators in laying the foundation to create the first "report card" on the Gulf of Mexico based on a Texas-based prototype.

"No one has ever tried to figure out how to assess the health of something as big and complex as the 600,000 square mile Gulf of Mexico," he said. "There have never been tools to do that. Our goal is to be able to answer ... if the money is being put to good use."

During the March gathering, about 50 county and city leaders and environmental experts will collaborate to identify indicators in the Texas Gulf that will help evaluate its ecological health,

used to better allocate resources for ongoing restoration and protection projects.

McKinney's long term goal for the project is to publish an annual report card inclusive of all ecosystems in the Gulf of Mexico.

A report card, if done correctly, also can help tax payers monitor their tax dollars, McKinney said.

"The best motivation for taking action to address problems in the Gulf is people being concerned," he said. "We're trying to provide the tool for the public to get involved. That puts pressure on decision-makers and resource agents to do something about (major problems)."

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