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Exploring America's Oceans for Our Health

MMS Announces Biotechnology Research Projects

Today, the Department of the Interior announced two research initiatives that will investigate potential biotechnology opportunities in America's oceans. The Department's Minerals Management Service is funding these studies with Louisiana State University and the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Deputy Secretary of the Interior, David J. Hayes, announced the research project in Santa Barbara, CA. "Marine biotechnology is a rapidly growing field. It is no secret that, like the rainforests, the oceans harbor life forms with untold potential for commercial and pharmaceutical uses. For example, compounds from some species of marine invertebrates, like the starfish, already show promise as tumor-fighting agents. From this exciting research, we hope to gain additional insight into the potential of life forms and marine organisms." Mr. Hayes noted that this biotechnology research initiative is part of President Clinton and Vice President Gore's oceans initiative. A complete report from the Cabinet-level Oceans Task Force will be delivered to the President later this year.

Other examples of marine pharmaceutical and medical uses include compounds from red algae that mimic the anti-inflammatory actions of specific human hormones. Another slow-growing marine invertebrate may contain an important drug that is active against leukemia. Yet another compound made from marine coral exoskeleton currently is used as an implant in the treatment of bone fractures.

Announcing the research project in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was Mr. Walt Rosenbusch, Director of the Minerals Management Service. "We are very excited to work on this important research project with LSU. By exploring America's oceans, we hope to learn more about how we can improve our health using marine organisms that may have pharmaceutical applications."

Rosenbusch explained another potential benefit from this research. "If the man-made offshore oil and gas structures prove to be viable substrate, then this type of marine bio-harvesting could significantly lessen the need to harvest organisms from the natural ecosystem. This could help protect the marine habitat as well as provide a sustainable source for beneficial natural products."

Each biotechnology project will cost approximately \$1,000,000 and is co-funded by MMS and the respective universities. The two projects are being coordinated through a joint initiative known as the Coastal Marine Institute (CMI).

About ten years ago, the MMS began looking at ways to strengthen relationships with states where offshore oil and gas activities took place, and assess the effects of these activities on the marine and social environment. The agency developed CMIs at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, University of California at Santa Barbara, and Louisiana State University to address these concerns. By matching funds with these universities, the MMS and respective states have been able to carry out important research that provides valuable information for solving key management issues related offshore oil and gas.

MMS is the Federal agency that manages the Nation's natural gas, oil, and other mineral resources on the OCS, and collects, accounts for and disburses about \$4 billion yearly in revenues from offshore Federal mineral leases and from onshore mineral leases on Federal and Indian lands.

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