



Contact: Daniel Parry, NOAA Public Affairs
(301) 713-3066

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 28, 2006

NOAA TEAM ASSESSES MARINE DEBRIS IMPACTS IN GULF REGION

NOAA's Office of Response and Restoration and Office of Coast Survey, working with the U.S. Coast Guard and other federal and state agencies, are assisting with Gulf of Mexico recovery efforts by performing hydrographic surveys and risk assessments of underwater debris left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The mapping aspect of the project will aid in the risk assessment and prioritization of the removal of debris to restore safe navigation and re-establish commercial fishing in the regions.

The survey work will include sounding measurements to determine the depth of the debris, as well as the use of side scan sonar — a towed device capable of scanning over 600 feet of seafloor side to side — to provide imagery of the seafloor and marine debris. NOAA's Office of Coast Survey will utilize the survey data to update nautical charts in the region, providing mariners with more accurate and up-to-date navigational information.

"In addition to the surveys and mapping, the team will work with the public to facilitate the development of debris risk assessment criteria," said Holly Bamford, director, NOAA's Marine Debris Program. "This public information program is designed to ensure that all parties are aware of NOAA's activities and to ensure that we address the needs and concerns of the public."

After the 2005 hurricane season, the coastal zones of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, and the near shore environment, were littered with debris hazardous to safe navigation, commercial fishing, recreational boating, and other normal activities. Storm surge, retreating flood-waters, and wrecked and lost recreational and commercial vessels were major sources of the debris.

The Office of Response and Restoration is leading the public information program effort, which also includes the development of an integrated project Web site that includes GIS interface to serve as a conduit between survey data from the field and those with a stake in the results of the surveys. The site also will include a marine debris risk assessment job evaluation aid for use by parties tasked to remove submerged debris in the future. Collaboration with local stakeholders and state agencies will be essential as NOAA works to determine their data needs through a series of workshops and develops methods of disseminating these data in a useful and effective manner.

To assist in the coordination efforts, the NOAA Gulf of Mexico Marine Debris Project team recently opened a field coordination office in New Orleans' Hale Boggs Federal Complex to work with stakeholders in the region for at least one year.

The NOAA Marine Debris Program works with other NOAA offices, as well as other federal, state and local agencies, and private sector partners to support national, state, local, and international efforts to protect and conserve our nation's natural resources and coastal waterways from marine debris.

In 2007 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, celebrates 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the

Weather Bureau and the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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On the Web:

Marine Debris Program: <http://marinedebris.noaa.gov/welcome.html>

Office of Response and Restoration: <http://response.restoration.noaa.gov/index.php>

Office of Coast Survey: <http://nauticalcharts.noaa.gov/>

NOAA National Ocean Service: www.nos.noaa.gov

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