NOAA NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA Dispatches Northeast Science Chief to Lead Rapid-Response Contamination Testing System

NOAA is sending one of its top fisheries science directors to the Gulf this week to lead its effort to rapidly assess, test and report findings about risks posed to fish in the Gulf of Mexico by contaminants from the BP oil spill and clean-up activities.

Nancy Thompson, Ph.D, director of NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC), will head to Pascagoula, Miss., to lead NOAA's response team. Thompson will work closely with Bonnie Ponwith, Ph.D., director at the agency's Southeast Fisheries Science Center, who is leading an intensified effort to monitor and assess the spill's effects on important species in the Gulf of Mexico.

"From her experience working on contaminant testing after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Nancy understands the science and knows the Gulf region," said Eric Schwaab, NOAA assistant administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "Her leadership in running our contaminant testing system is an important step in ensuring NOAA can continue efforts related to fisheries management priorities in the Gulf."

Thompson's arrival will allow Ponwith to focus on both her oil spill duties as well as high-priority regional issues in fisheries management, including leading stock assessments for red snapper stocks and working with the Gulf, Caribbean and South Atlantic fishery management councils.

The rapid-response testing involves chemical analysis of water samples and chemical and sensory analysis of fish and shellfish. These will be compared with samples taken immediately following the spill and after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Scientists will also compare actual or projected locations of contaminants with normal locations of fish in the Gulf. Scientists at the Pascagoula lab, led by director Lisa Desfosse, Ph.D., will support efforts by continuing aerial surveys to monitor the location of marine mammals and sea turtles and by collecting fish and shellfish samples for contaminant analysis.

NOAA will use test results and analysis in making decisions about where and how fishing should be curtailed in the region affected by the BP oil spill, and about whether seafood is safe for consumption. The NOAA system will be coordinated with other agencies active in the response, including the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency.

During Thompson's temporary absence, deputy Frank Almeida will act as director of the NEFSC and will continue work on critical groundfish issues in that region. "NOAA has a deep bench that is flexible and can work together as a team to handle both the oil spill response and our normal operations in the regions," said Steve Murawski, Ph.D., chief science advisor for NOAA Fisheries. "Frank, Bonnie and Nancy are some of our most respected scientists, and will handle these challenges ably."

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