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June 23, 2010

The Hon. Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
1000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350-1000

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Thank you for your call yesterday to discuss your new responsibilities for directing the Gulf coastal restoration efforts.

As the former Governor of Mississippi, you bring a special knowledge of the challenges the four Gulf States face in the wake of our nation's greatest environmental disaster. While the St. Petersburg-Clearwater area of Florida is not in immediate danger from the spread of oil, we are preparing for the worst and hoping for the best outcome. As we discussed, our local economy is heavily centered upon the tourism and fishing industries. Even the threat of oil coming upon our shoreline has already had a major impact on our hotel and restaurant industry. At a standing room only community forum last week, it was reported that our local beach business has declined 30 percent so far this year.

We also discussed the special role that our Pinellas County area has played in helping to monitor the projected flow of oil in the Gulf, its impact upon sensitive estuaries and waterways and upon local wildlife, vegetation and fish populations. The Bayboro Harbor area of St. Petersburg is home to one of the top international centers on marine science and the academic and scientific community there has brought together for this effort all the state's major universities, non-profit research organizations and the private sector to provide scientific analysis and modeling of the Gulf spill. Led by the Florida Institute of Oceanography, the St. Petersburg team includes the University of South Florida College of Marine Science and Center for Ocean Technology, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, The National Marine Fisheries Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, SRI International's Marine Technology Program, the International Ocean Institute – USA, and the Tampa Bay Estuary Program. Additional community resources include the Marine Science Program at Eckerd College, the Mote Marine Laboratory, the Pier Aquarium, the Florida Aquarium, the Clearwater Marine Aquarium, and the Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary. This is an impressive list of organizations with a wide array of relevant expertise that can be a significant resource to you as you address Gulf coast recovery and restoration efforts.

It is important to note that Coast Guard Sector St. Petersburg is also one of the three original Unified Incident Command Centers that focuses the scientific expertise of these organizations and coordinates emergency response activities with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the Florida National Guard, our county emergency coordinators, and state and local officials.

Having met with and stayed in touch with the unified command and representatives of these organizations on a regular basis since the spill occurred, there is no doubt in my mind that you would find it invaluable in your work if you would join me to spend time in St. Petersburg to get a feel for all that this team has to offer you as you take on the critical task of restoring the environment and the economy of the Gulf Coast. You will also find it of interest to know that much of the scientific capability available there is derived directly from the investment of Navy Research and Development funds. The original purpose of those projects was to ensure port security for our ships abroad and for securing our nation's ports in the wake of 9-11.

It has been a pleasure to work with you over the past year in support of Navy programs and I look forward to continuing to work with you in restoring our Gulf Coast states. Please call on me whenever I can be of assistance to you as a member of the Committee on Appropriations and the Florida Congressional Delegation.

With best wishes and personal regards, I am

Very truly yours,

C. W. Bill Young
Member of Congress

CWY:hg

Enclosure

In dealing with oil spill, research dollars pay off

The Gulf of Mexico oil spill is emerging as one of the great environmental disasters in U.S. history. This is focusing attention on the scientific groups that study the oil escaping from the Deepwater Horizon well. Much like the situation after the 1979 Ixtoc disaster that spilled almost three supertankers' worth of oil in the western gulf, the answers to where the oil is going and what it is affecting are being provided by marine scientists from a number of universities and laboratories.

PETER R. BETZER

In 1979, professors William M. Sackett and Ted Van Vleet from the University of South Florida's Department of Marine Science responded to Gov. Bob Graham's concern about Florida's marine environment. They collected and analyzed tar balls from the eastern Gulf of Mexico. The surprising result was that the abundant tar balls found concentrated in open waters of the eastern gulf were not from Ixtoc but primarily derived from oil tankers washing down the walls of their tanks and discharging the oily water at sea.

For BP's Deepwater Horizon disaster, scientists and engineers from USF's College of Marine Science are again leading efforts to understand the distribution, movement and interactions of the plumes of oil spreading through the gulf. A wide array of analytical techniques, including satellite remote sensing, chemical/physical/biological sensing and mathematical modeling, are being applied. It is a daunting challenge to understand the movement and the interactions of the plumes of oil. Indeed, a complete understanding of this immense disaster is unlikely to emerge.

However, the insights from the research are a tribute to the long-term support USF's College of Marine Science and Center for Ocean Technology have received from U.S. Rep. C.W. Bill Young, R-Indian Shores. Thanks to his backing, contracts from the Office of Naval Research — starting in 1994 and continuing through 2011 — support the development of many of the advanced sensing and monitoring systems being deployed to monitor oil and the gulf ecosystem. These funds also supported the monitoring buoys deployed offshore as well as the mathematical modeling surrounding this oil spill, hurricane storm surge and Red Tide. The underwater mass spectrometer that SRI St. Petersburg and their colleagues at USF are deploying, as well as other equipment, monitoring systems and remotely operated vehicles being used, would not otherwise be available to address the daunting environmental challenge presented by this oil spill. We can all be thankful that one of our leaders had the vision, the insight and the courage to provide sustained support for science that is critical to understanding our complex marine environment.

While it is depressing to contemplate what is happening in the gulf, it is important to credit someone who consistently supported critical science even though he knew it would open him to criticism about congressional earmarks. Further, it was the sensor development program Young championed for USF at the Defense Department and the engineering talent associated with USF's College of Marine Science and Center for Ocean Technology that attracted SRI International to select St. Petersburg as the site for its new research center. Thankfully, SRI's scientists and engineers are collaborating with their colleagues — including those at USF, the U.S. Geological Survey, the Coast Guard, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Florida's State University System — who are also dedicated to understanding this vast oil spill and committed to applying their intellect and advanced technologies to what will almost certainly become a decade-long effort.

Peter R. Betzer is dean emeritus of the University of South Florida College of Marine Science.