

**U.S. Department of the Interior
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MMS Awards Contracts to Universities for Environmental Studies

The U.S. Department of the Interior's Minerals Management Service (MMS) today announced contract awards to several universities to conduct a variety of environmental studies relating to offshore natural gas and oil exploration and development.

Texas A&M University's Research Foundation in College Station received a \$2.5 million contract to study chemosynthetic animal communities living near hydrothermal vents in the Gulf of Mexico seafloor. These remarkable animals, discovered in 1982 near petroleum seeps in the Gulf, get their metabolic energy from dissolved hydrogen sulfide issuing from the vents. MMS has required industry to protect them from the physical effects of natural gas and oil exploration and production. The study is expected to take about three and a half years.

Another \$160,000 grant went to the Texas A&M Research Foundation in Corpus Christie to continue long-term monitoring of the East and West Flower Garden Banks -- a pair of colorful coral reefs about 120 miles offshore Texas designated a National Marine Sanctuary by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 1992. The two-year study will monitor the health of corals and coralline algae of the reef crests.

The University of California, Santa Barbara received a \$ 420,966 contract to assess aspects of the economic, social, and political context of petroleum extraction and its impact on communities in San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties, California. A report is expected in September 1998.

A grant of \$450,000 was awarded to the University of Washington, Seattle, to process, analyze and interpret data collected from the Southern California Bight, an area designated by the National Research Council as needing study to support Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) natural gas and oil pre- and post-lease decisions. This study will use information gathered from previous work performed by the Department of Energy and MMS. The work is expected to span about three years.

"Our responsibilities for managing offshore mineral resources require the acquisition of comprehensive information so we can make the best decisions possible," said MMS Director Cynthia Quarterman. "These studies will make significant contributions to our environmental and scientific data base of information."

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

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