BP attempts to buy silence of Gulf Coast scientists

Josué Olmos
27 July 2010

As part of its campaign to cover up the devastating effects of the Gulf oil spill, BP offered lucrative contracts to public university scientists that stipulated strict secrecy and lawyer-dictated research assignments, according to recent reports.

Since the spill, BP has hired more than a dozen public university scientists and has offered contracts to dozens more under the auspices of its participation in the Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA). Established by the 1990 Oil Pollution Act in the wake of the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill, the NRDA allows the oil industry to participate with the government in calculating the cost of restoration after spills.

The contracts being offered by BP have raised concerns among scientists because of the strict secrecy they demand and the likelihood that they will entail the violation of basic principles of academic and intellectual freedom. Clearly, BP has a vested financial interest in producing scientific studies that minimize the scope of the damage done to the Gulf of Mexico and the Gulf Coast.

The head of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, George Crozier, told the *Mobile Press-Register* that the contract "makes me feel like they were more interested in making sure we couldn't testify against them than in having us testify for them."

Under the terms of the contract, published by the BBC, BP demands that scientists take instructions only from "BP Attorneys."

"This is not an agreement to do research for BP, this is an agreement to join BP's legal team," explained environmental lawyer Robert Wiygul. "You agree to communicate with BP through their attorneys and to take orders from their attorneys."

The contract also prohibits scientists from sharing with anyone beyond BP information obtained while conducting research. It demands that scientists shall "maintain the strict confidentiality of…non-public communications and information unless or until a person from whom you are authorized to take instructions [BP Attorneys] informs you in writing that this restriction is no longer applicable to any particular non-public communication or information."

The contract imposes a three-year gag order on scientists, prohibiting them from sharing or publishing any of the information obtained while under contract or until the NRDA restoration plan is completed and approved.

Scientists are also prohibited by the contract from doing any "research and data collection and analysis services" for the government or non-profit organizations if the work conflicts with the scientists' performance of BP NRDA services.

Scientists are reportedly being offered anywhere from $150 to $250 per hour, depending on their level of experience, in exchange for their work for BP.

At one point, BP reportedly attempted to put under contract the entire marine sciences department at the University of South Alabama.

The head of that department, Bob Shipp, told the BBC: "We laid the ground rules—that any research we did, we would have to take total control of the data, transparency and the freedom to make those data available to other scientists and subject to peer review. They left and we never heard back from them."

The story was corroborated by Russ Lea, vice-president of research at the University of South Alabama. "We are a public university, and our mission is to make sure that what we gain as far as information, in our university, is disseminated widely," Lea said. "No matter what it is, no matter how damning or positive it might be, or how new it might be is to get

© World Socialist Web Site

the information out there, for everybody to utilize that. This is too important an issue to have new information regarding the spill locked up."

Some who originally agreed to work for BP, such as Joe Griffitt, an assistant professor of coastal sciences at the University of Southern Mississippi, have since quit their consulting positions after meeting with BP representatives. Griffitt told *Insidehighered.com*: "We're all employees of the state of Mississippi, and none of us really felt comfortable about testifying on the other side—even if what we said was scientifically accurate."

Cary Nelson, president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), responded to the news of BP's attempts to purchase public university scientists in a column on *Insidehighered.com*. "The very prospect of an interested corporation worth billions of dollars blocking the free exchange of university research and controlling the work scientists choose to do is deeply disturbing," he wrote.

Nelson suggested the revelations of BP attempting to buy off scientitsts offered a good time to "reexamine the increasing role corporations are playing in funding and controlling university research," and called for new ethical standards that would guard academic principles such as freedom of speech and open collaboration.

Scientists have noted that BP's offer has been enticing for some under conditions in which federal and state funding for research in public universities has become scarce. The drain in research funding creates an opportunity for BP to lure cash-strapped departments and scientists.

"People are signing on with BP because the government funding to the universities has been so limited," Richard Shaw, associate dean of the Louisiana State University School of the Coast and Environment, told the *Press-Register*. "It's a sad state of affairs. The science is already suffering. The government needs to come through with funding for the universities. They are letting go of the most important group of scientists, the ones who study the Gulf."

The latest report of BP's attempts to buy the silence of public university scientists is at one with the efforts by the oil major and the Obama administration to block public scrutiny of the catastrophe.

The federal government has imposed a sweeping media blockade on most of the spill area, including an order prohibiting fly-overs, and it has denied scientists and engineers independent access to the ruptured Macondo well located one mile beneath the ocean's surface.

This campaign to cover over the effect that the spill will have on the entire Gulf Coast and its residents will undoubtedly continue.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site