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## **USF says government tried to squelch their oil plume findings**

By [Craig Pittman](#), Times Staff Writer  
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A month after the Deepwater Horizon disaster began, scientists from the University of South Florida made a startling announcement. They had found signs that the oil spewing from the well had formed a 6-mile-wide plume snaking along in the deepest recesses of the gulf.

The reaction that USF announcement received from the Coast Guard and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the federal agencies that sponsored their research:

Shut up.

"I got lambasted by the Coast Guard and NOAA when we said there was undersea oil," USF marine sciences dean William Hogarth said. Some officials even told him to retract USF's public announcement, he said, comparing it to being "beat up" by federal officials.

The USF scientists weren't alone. Vernon Asper, an oceanographer at the University of Southern Mississippi, was part of a similar effort that met with a similar reaction. "We expected that NOAA would be pleased because we found something very, very interesting," Asper said. "NOAA instead responded by trying to discredit us. It was just a shock to us."

NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco, in comments she made to reporters in May, expressed strong skepticism about the existence of undersea oil plumes — as did BP's then-CEO, Tony Hayward.

"She basically called us inept idiots," Asper said. "We took that very personally."

Lubchenco confirmed Monday that her agency told USF and other academic institutions involved in the study of undersea plumes that they should hold off talking so openly about it. "What we asked for, was for people to stop speculating before they had a chance to analyze what they were finding," Lubchenco said. "We think that's in everybody's interest. ... We just wanted to try to make sure that we knew something before we speculated about it."

"We had solid evidence, rock solid," Asper said. "We weren't speculating." If he had to do it over again, he said, he'd do it all exactly the same way, despite Lubchenco's ire.

Coast Guard officials did not respond to a request for comment on Hogarth's accusation.

The discovery of multiple undersea plumes of oil droplets was eventually verified by one of NOAA's own research vessels. And last month USF scientists announced they at last could match the oil droplets in the undersea plumes to the millions of barrels of oil that gushed from the collapsed well until it was capped July 15.

"What we have learned completely changes the idea of what an oil spill is," USF scientist David Hollander said then. "It has gone from a two-dimensional disaster to a three-dimensional catastrophe."

Now Lubchenco is not only convinced the undersea plumes exist, but she is predicting that some of the spill's most significant impacts will be caused by their effect on juvenile sea creatures such as bluefin tuna. Lubchenco and her staff say they are now working smoothly with USF and other academic institutions in investigating the consequences of the largest marine oil spill in history.

However, Hogarth said, not all is hunky-dory.

USF's first NOAA-sponsored voyage to take samples after Deepwater Horizon, the one that turned up evidence of the undersea plumes, was designed to gather evidence for use in an eventual court case against BP and other oil companies involved in the disaster. At the end of the voyage, USF turned its samples over to NOAA, expecting to get either a shared analysis or the samples themselves back. So far, Hogarth said, they've received neither.

NOAA's top oil spill scientist, Steve Murawski, said Monday that he was "sure we will release the data" at some point. However, he said, because NOAA has collected so many samples over the past three months, when it comes to the samples from USF's trip in May, "I'm not sure where they are."

Lubchenco's agency came under fire last week for a new report that said "the vast majority" of the oil from Deepwater Horizon had been taken care of. Scientists who read the report closely said it actually said half the oil was still unaccounted for.

Lubchenco said anyone who read the report as saying the oil was gone read it wrong.

"Out of sight and diluted does not mean benign," she said.

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