

CONNECTING SCIENTISTS TO CITIZENS REGARDING SEA LEVEL RISE

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Municipal officials and citizen groups often have limited opportunities to connect with scientists and use their research results, even though in many cases these results affect these groups' actions and lives. Tools developed to assist these stakeholders in individual and community planning are also often underutilized (Stephens et al., 2014, 2015). This presentation describes a project designed to engage and inform citizens in the northern Gulf of Mexico about sea level rise (SLR) decision- support tools developed to help stakeholders understand and prepare for the local effects of rising seas. The impetus for this project was the need to strengthen scientist-citizen interaction, as identified from stakeholder feedback in a long-term study about the ecological effects of SLR in the northern Gulf. The project partners were from the Apalachicola, Grand Bay, and Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserves (NERRs); Louisiana State University; the University of Central Florida (UCF); The Nature Conservancy (TNC); and NOAA's Office for Coastal Management; and facilitated by the Alabama Coastal Foundation.

During the first year of this two-year project, six total focus groups (two separate focus groups at each NERR; one with citizens and one with municipal officials) were conducted to identify information needs and concerns regarding SLR and SLR decision-support tools. The findings were categorized into three main areas; 1) information content needs, such as making planning decisions related to ecology, the economy, health, and safety; 2) format and features needs, such as making information engaging, trustworthy, and accessible; and, 3) outreach recommendations, such as using existing networks, connecting to representatives from a wide array of organizations, and sharing personal narratives about SLR.

During the second year, these focus group findings were used to guide the development of stakeholder workshops and outreach materials about SLR and three SLR decision-support tools (UCF's MIRA-CDSLRL, TNC's Coastal Resilience, and NOAA's Sea Level Rise and Coastal Flooding Impacts Viewer).

Workshops were held at each NERR for citizens and municipal officials in order to present and distribute this material and demonstrate how the decision-support tools can be used to help with SLR planning and communication. There are three key project outcomes; 1) workshop participants are aware of and informed about tools that can be used to plan and prepare for sea level rise; 2) workshop participants know how to use the basic functions in these tools; and 3) outreach materials are more widely available to citizens and municipal

officials across the region via the Internet and interpersonal networks.