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EDITORIAL: Harbor Branch grant to tap ocean of potential



Palm Beach Post Editorial

Friday, May 22, 2009

Three years ago, the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute in Fort Pierce was struggling to survive. Today, it is thriving because state legislators invested in its future - \$44.6 million in one-time costs, and \$13.8 million annually - by merging the institute with Florida Atlantic University.

That investment is paying off with the \$22.5 million grant Harbor Branch received this month to establish a cooperative institute that will focus on ocean exploration, research and technology development for all of the U.S. East Coast.

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The five-year grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration - the largest competitive research award earned by the university and its institute - makes Harbor Branch an anchor for attracting biotech and other research facilities to the Treasure Coast. "They are calling us the Research Coast," said Dennis Hanisak, director of the center for marine ecosystem health at Harbor Branch. "There's lots of opportunity for development of new technologies in engineering and biotech. This would be a real crown jewel to the Research Coast."

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Harbor Branch conducts research into whether the ocean holds potential cures for cancer, Alzheimer's, AIDS and other diseases, and has found an anti-tumor agent in a sea sponge. Its scientists devised a protection system to save manatees from being crushed in navigational locks.

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"Everybody ought to care about the ocean," said Dr. Hanisak. "The ocean is a great reservoir for what we are doing. It absorbs a lot of the carbon dioxide that we keep producing. Things such as climate change would be far worse if we didn't have the moderation of the ocean." He added that research is important to keeping the ocean healthy for aesthetic purposes and because of the seafood it supplies.

Along with Harbor Branch, the research hub in St. Lucie County includes the Smithsonian Institution, the University of Florida's agricultural research operation, Florida Atlantic University and the Florida State University-Indian River State College medical program. The new Cooperative Institute for Ocean Exploration, Research and Technology will be headquartered at Harbor Branch and co-managed by the University of North Carolina-Wilmington. The University of Miami will be a partner. The institute will focus on three areas: development of advanced underwater technologies, exploration of the continental shelf and research on coral reefs.

Harbor Branch's merger with FAU came with a high public cost. The benefits - a boost to Florida's struggling economy and research that could transform the larger society - are well worth it.

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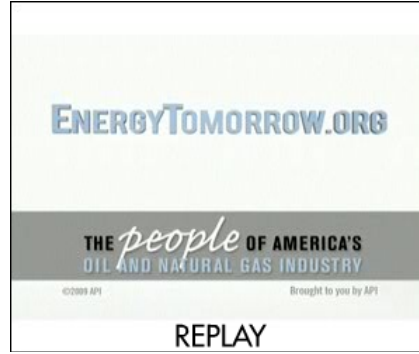
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