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UNH Programmers Lauded For Oil Spill Response Tool

September 28, 2010

DURHAM, N.H. – Just as the flow of oil in the Gulf of Mexico ceased, accolades began flooding in for a web-based spill response tool developed by the University of New Hampshire's Research Computing Center (RCC).

The Environmental Response Management Application (ERMA®), developed by RCC in partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the UNH/NOAA Coastal Response Research Center, was recognized as one of the top 10 government websites by Government Computer News. In addition, ERMA's NOAA collaborators received the 2010 NOAA Administrator's and Technology Transfer Award.

"I'm saddened that this award revolves around such a terrible disaster, but I'm pleased that the excellent work of our team is being recognized," said Patrick Messer, director of the Research Computing Center at UNH.

"RCC's hard work, integrity, creativity and 'can do' spirit helped launch the UNH/NOAA developed and trademarked ERMA to the national level during the recent Gulf crisis," said Nancy Kinner, professor of civil and environmental engineering and co-director of the Coastal Response Research Center. "UNH can be very proud of its unflinching dedication to the nation and the environment in cleaning up the worst oil spill in history."

ERMA, first developed three years ago as a tool for spill responders, is a web-based GIS platform that incorporates data from the various agencies that worked together to tackle the spill. Round-the-clock work by UNH's RCC, in particular technical lead Robert St. Lawrence and information technologist Philip Collins, redeployed the Gulf of Mexico version of ERMA in several hours, within days after the BP Deepwater Horizon spill began. ERMA integrates the latest data on the oil spill's trajectory, fishery closure areas, wildlife and place-based Gulf Coast resources -- such as pinpointed locations of oiled shoreline and daily position of research and response vessels -- into one customizable interactive map.

In June, after securing additional hardware capacity, NOAA launched a public version of ERMA created by UNH -- www.geoplatform.gov -- to facilitate communication and coordination among a variety of users, from federal, state and local responders to local community leaders and the public. Beyond NOAA data, it includes data from Homeland Security, the Coast Guard, the Fish and Wildlife Service, EPA, NASA, U.S. Geological Survey and the Gulf states. It is designed to be fast, user-friendly and constantly updated. Geoplatform.gov had 3.4 million hits in the first day of its release.

"In addition to providing a common picture for all response organizations, the project potentially saved millions of dollars that would have been spent on a new solution," says the award citation.

St. Lawrence will attend the GCN Awards gala in Tyson's Corner, Va., Oct. 27, 2010, and ERMA will be profiled with the other winners in GCN's Oct. 18, 2010, issue.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.

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