



Dauphin Island Sea Lab

Alabama Center for
Marine Education and Research

Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium Executive Committee Annual Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, August 28, 2024 at 9:00 a.m.

Attendees:

Mr. Jo Bonner, University of South Alabama
Dr. Chris Roberts, Auburn University
Dr. Chuck Karr, University of Alabama at Huntsville
Dr. Ken Tucker, University of West Alabama
Dr. John Valentine, Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium
David England, Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium
Shelley Stephens, Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium
Dr. Joe Busta, Special Advisor to DISL

Absent:

Dr. Stuart Bell, University of Alabama

- Meeting called to order by Mr. Bonner, Chair of the Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium (MESC) Executive Committee at 9:00 a.m.
- Roll call of conference call attendees by Dr. Valentine, noting that President Bell was absent from the call due to scheduling conflicts and the presence of Dr. Joe Busta who has been service as a special advisor for academic matters to the DISL.
- Dr. Valentine took a moment to request attendees review the agenda and suggest any additional topics the Executive Committee members present would like to add. Per the request of President Bonner, an Executive Session was added to this year's call agenda.
- Dr. Valentine requested a motion to approve minutes from the 2023 MESC Executive Committee conference call. Motion made by Mr. Bonner to approve the minutes; motion seconded by Dr. Tucker. Motion to approve minutes carried.
- Dr. Valentine reviewed three items from the Articles of Incorporation that are critical to the MESC function:
 - The MESC is directed to provide classes to the undergraduate and graduate students of Member Institutions through the State of Alabama.
 - The MESC is directed to provide pure and applied research programs in marine sciences.
 - The MESC is directed to promote and encourage communication and dialogue among interested parties who are curious about the marine sciences, essentially K through "gray" education.

NEW BUSINESS

Fiscal Year 2025 Budget (Attached Document A) –

- Dr. Valentine and David England reviewed the summary format of the FY25 budget, with the top two categories addressing expenses which are unrestricted and categorized by function. The bottom three categories address revenues and they, too, are categorized by function. This format has been used for the last five to six years.

- David England explained that auxiliary funds are primarily driven by revenues from the rebranded Aquarium and its gift shop along with our campus food services and the proposed \$24 million budget comes from the sum of the auxiliary funds, unrestricted funds and the funds restricted through grants and contracts generated by approximately 40 soft-funded employees.
- Dr. Valentine reiterated that hindcasting is continually used to evaluate and estimate revenues, along with being overly conservative about expenses,
- Dr. Valentine asked if the Executive Committee had any questions. Mr. Bonner asked for the composition of the current full-time employees between staff and faculty and the plan to fill three open faculty positions. Dr. Valentine replied that of the 60, all but five were support personnel such as cafeteria, facilities, Aquarium, technical support and administrative staff. The remaining five are five full-time faculty and an advertisement to fill the open three faculty positions. Once filled this will bring us to eight faculty members, which will be about as high as we have ever been in terms of corporate faculty. Dr. Roberts asked about the function of the technical staff, to which Dr. Valentine replied there are many demands of this department including our water monitoring effort through the real time stations across coastal Alabama, maintaining our wet lab facilities, and monthly cleanings of our intake pumps.
- Dr. Valentine explained the fiscal notes on page two of the budget, including receiving an unmodified opinion from the State Auditors, meaning there were no findings. The notes also highlighted how recent supplemental appropriations were being spent. Our appropriation also included a \$250,000 earmark to split between the Mississippi Alabama Sea Grant and Mobile Bay National Estuary Program. The Sea Grant earmark has to be committed to research in Alabama per the Legislature.
- Next Dr. Valentine spoke to the next phase of renovation in the Alabama Aquarium that is being designed with young visitors in mind. This renovation will begin by year end. Our goal is have this renovation of the Little Billy Goat Hole exhibit completed by early April next year.
- This year the \$2 Million bond taken out in 2015 for much needed campus renovations was paid off. A large portion of these funds went towards materials and the lion's share of the work was performed by our very skilled craftsmen and facilities staff. Additionally, the energy savings contract we undertook in 2020 was our only way to replace our 50-ton air conditioners. This ESCO not only provided the new Acs, it allowed us to expand our solar array which has dramatically reduced our kilowatt hours of demand.
- Every summer we receive student criticism of our dormitories, which are ancient, enlisted men barracks. While we have done quite a bit to upgrade the dorms, mold and mildew have been a challenge to us in the past due to high humidity. We began replacing windows and window air conditioners this summer and did not encounter this this summer said Dr. Valentine. We were able to undertake this through supplemental funding.
- Next Dr. Valentine presented a recommendation for a 3% merit raise citing the challenge of recruiting and retaining valuable employees given our location at the end of the road.
- While still on the topic of the proposed budget, Mr. Bonner asked what the current shortfall was for the construction of the new dormitory. He specifically asked how much is in hand and what is the balance needed to proceed. Dr. Valentine replied that this question would be answered shortly under the agenda item specifically addressing this topic.
- With that, Dr. Valentine called for a vote to accept the proposed FY25 budget.

Motion to accept the proposed FY2025 MESC budget made by Dr. Tucker; seconded by Dr. Karr, followed by a unanimous vote to accept.

- **University Programs Summer School Performance Metrics**
 - Dr. Valentine reminded Executive Committee members of the discussion of the pilot spring semester on the 2023 call, which has been driven by the growth in the University of Alabama’s undergraduate marine biology program, and the growing marine sciences program on Mr. Bonner’s University of South Alabama campus. To meet the demands of these programs we have had to add coursework. While this program was initially a pilot program for USA’s students, since we are designed to serve the consortium, we are obligated to allow other schools to access these spring courses. The spring courses could be particularly important to our HBCU members because their students have to work during the summer, and this is an obstacle to their summer participation.
 - Dr. Valentine pointed to the pie chart of this spring’s enrollment. While USA dominated the enrollment, some of this was due to their proximity to USA’s main campus and taking other courses along with the marine courses. Overall there were six schools that took advantage of this spring term and this program is projected to grow dramatically in the coming year.
 - On the next slide, Dr. Valentine reviewed the results of summer 2024 session enrollment that continues to prove that DISL is meeting the mandate in the MESC Articles of Incorporation. We had 15 of our 21 universities represented, while some of our smaller schools saw decreases in their numbers. Historically our numbers are dominated by Alabama, Auburn, and USA. USA has really come on gangbusters and is doing great in their recruiting, as you can see in their growth of number of students.
 - One the next slide Dr. Valentine highlighted the historical growth in the demand for courses. He pointed out that beginning around 2007 the trend in demand from undergraduate and graduate courses really began growing year over year. This year, Summer 2024, we delivered 1,796 undergraduate and graduate credit hours.

- **Discovery Hall Programs Summer School Performance Metrics**
 - Next Dr. Valentine quickly touched on the performance of DISL’s K-12 program known as Discovery Hall. For the 2023-2024 academic year, 8,523 K-12 students, teachers, and chaperones were served by overnight programs on our campus and this represented 43% of Alabama’s counties. Additionally, some 10,982 students were served through our mobile classroom known as BayMobile at 38 schools, 25 of which were Title 1 schools. During this summer, over 400 students and some 46 educators were served through camps, teacher professional development, and the high school marine science programs.
 - This program has been going gangbusters as well for some time, and sometimes we have a bit of friction over providing infrastructure, which is why the new dormitory is important.

- **Research Facilities and Programs -**
 - Dr. Valentine briefly discussed several of the current research facilities, including the multisessor research lab completed through supplemental funding awarded in 2019. This lab is important because we recognize that not only do we have historical stressors that impact the productivity of our coastal zone, we also have new stressors that are complicating our interpretation of what is going on out there. The professional technicians that Dr. Roberts asked about earlier, are the ones who designed this facility. It has 32

tanks that scientists can manipulate variables like dissolved oxygen, temperature, and Ph in real time, often from their desk no matter where they are in the consortium. The jubilees you here about are an example of what a low oxygen event is in coastal Alabama. This is a pretty significant addition to our campus and it received great national attention in the news. There are only a couple of these in existence that I know of, said Dr. Valentine.

- Dr. Valentine made the Executive Committee aware of DISL's recent hiring of a full-time Dive Safety Officer at the request of the UP program officers and those that have graduate and undergraduate programs in marine biology. DISL has always been strong in scientific diving and now we have someone teaching that full-time. We hired him away from the University of Maine and he's offering courses as we speak in introductory research diving, we will be adding an intermediate and advanced course in the near future. These are incredibly rigorous courses, and DISL is a long-time member of AAUS. Several of our staff have served as presidents of this organization over the years. AAUS is the American Associate of Underwater Sciences. We need this dive training because of liability and among other things to be in compliance with the standards of AAUS, and in compliance with OSHA who heavily regulates diving. If you are AAUS-certified through our programs we have the ability to issue letters of reciprocity to the host organization researchers may work with and allows researchers to hit the ground running. We have a Dive Safety Board comprised of our DSO, myself, Chuck Amsler (UAB) and now Ben Titus (Alabama).
- The last program Dr. Valentine wanted to highlight was the Alabama Center of Excellence which was funded out of the RESTORE Act. Some four years back the Gulf Recovery Council with the State of Alabama to designate the MESC to the Alabama's Center of Excellence. Two RFPs have been issued to the MESC members, each of your VPRs and scientists have received notice of these. The first RFP focused on the multistressors with awards around \$150,000 each and we were able to distribute \$4,332,000 and some change to fund the highly competitive grant awards. The RFPs were panel-reviewed and mandated collaboration across MESC member schools. Many of our awards saw scientists from three member schools collaborating on a project. Our second RFP focuses on working with emerging technology which is cutting edge.
- **Campus Upgrades**
 - Next Dr. Valentine discussed upgrades currently in process across the DISL campus. The first project to highlight is the window and HVAC upgrade to the existing dormitories which were originally enlisted men's barracks. This project is being managed by Southland Energy and funded by \$7 Million in legislative supplements and will be highly energy efficient and decrease our kilowatt hour demands. Part of the bond we paid off is being paid by the savings afforded us through the ESCO. The 1950's and 1960's construction of these dorms did not have HVAC so the window units were added along the way. Now we're replacing those and added impact windows to help us protect against hurricane damage. We will have mini-splits in each room for AC and a heat pump servicing each block of 5 to 6 rooms. The students are already speaking positively of these changes. We will work to upgrade the flooring over the Christmas holiday when we do not have students.
 - The second campus project covered by Dr. Valentine was the outdoor classroom that will be located adjacent to the new pool. There is currently a bid out for construction of this space and it will be an open air design to support the scientific dive program as well as DISL's nationally recognized remote-operated-vehicle (ROV) annual competition, which frequently brings in over 100 K-12 students. This competition is funded by our Foundation who also funded the new pool which is already seeing a lot of use. We anticipate this

classroom being functional by April 2025.

- Returning to the question Mr. Bonner asked earlier regarding the new dormitory, Dr. Valentine stated that DISL has received approximately \$10 Million from the Legislature so far and construction estimates project the cost to be \$15.5 Million. Dr. Valentine stressed the need for the Legislature to grant the remainder through another supplement if at all possible. The design of this dorm would provide a total of 96 beds on two floors. The money in hand thus far would only build one floor. He further explained the need for housing options to serve undergraduate and graduate students, as well as visiting MESC scientists. With the second floor being designed as two-bedroom apartments, it would also provide support to Auburn's aquaculture program for their visiting scientists and rotating students in and out for short terms. DISL also struggles to facilitate regional meetings that could otherwise be held on Dauphin Island. For those of you who have visited the island, there just aren't any hotels to speak of short of the small cinder block facility down the street. Mr. Bonner stated that Dr. Valentine answered his earlier question with this.
- Mr. Bonner asked the follow-up question that if DISL were to proceed with the first floor using the \$10 Million provided thus far by the Legislature, is the design and engineering such that if additional funding is secured in coming years, could the dorm build up and add to it. He stated that many institutions use this approach. Dr. Valentine replied the current plan would be to build the second floor only as a shell so that it could be completed later if necessary and this alternative will be part of the bid package.
- The last infrastructure item covered by Dr. Valentine is the budget shortfall for the new research vessel. Dr. Valentine stated the new vessel is to address the inability for researchers and students to stay offshore overnight which greatly impacts research project schedules. The new vessel was designed by a committee of researchers with additional needs to work in shallower water and get to sites faster. These needs predicated the design with an aluminum hull. We have completed the design and bid process, but are short on funding to complete construction. Dr. Valentine has not yet had an opportunity to meet with ADCNR Commissioner Blankenship to discuss options for assistance. If our current bid is correct, we are around \$1.25 Million short so we will have to prioritize what we can spend money on and what we cannot but we really need this vessel. It has been designed in such a way to have a wide audience for use and not stay tied up at the dock. It will be 65-feet long and there is an open niche in the Gulf of Mexico right now for a vessel of this size. Most other research vessels out there are 100-feet long and we certainly do not want the operating costs that go with vessel of that size. The State has been very supportive in the design of this vessel and we thank them for helping us get GOMESA funds for this.
- **Community Engagement**
 - Reminding the Executive Committee of the recent rebranding of the Estuarium to the Alabama Aquarium, Dr. Valentine pointed out how the attendance has dramatically increased from roughly 80,000-plus to over 100,000 visitors. As of the end of July the Aquarium had 83,000 visitors and it's estimated year-end attendance could be close to 125,000. With completion of the next renovation (Little Billy Goat Hole) we will probably see more than this.
 - Lastly Dr. Valentine wanted to highlight the efforts of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab Foundation which hosts two major fundraisers each year. The first being Cocktails with the Critters which is held on the Delta and last year's event saw a record attendance of 500 individuals. In the fall, the Foundation holds it's award luncheon that recognizes citizens who are doing good for the environment through their

volunteer activities or their interactions as government. Attendance at this luncheon has grown from about 50 to 300 this past year. This year's luncheon keynote speaker will be Dr. Larry Madin, who was the Deputy Director of Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, and is an expert in zooplankton, which is basically larval crustacean shrimps, crabs, fishes, and he is one of the first to use scuba diving and submersibles in situ.

- **Organizational Challenges**

- Dr. Valentine closed his report to the Executive Committee by reviewing the organizational challenges currently facing the MESC. The first being the shortfall of funding on the research vessel, second being the shortfall of funding for the second floor of the new dormitory, and lastly the recent structural engineer report indicating Discovery Hall's Endeavor building has about five year's left in its service life and will need to be replaced. Lastly, Dr. Valentine stated a universal IDC cost-sharing policy will need to be created in the future.
- Mr. Bonner asked if there were any further questions from the Executive Committee member regarding agenda items. Hearing none, Mr. Bonner moved to proceed to an Executive Session of the committee at 10:00 a.m.