Building sargassum & oil spill monitoring capabilities in the Caribbean and adjacent regions

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Experts from 15 countries meet in Mexico City to discuss collaborating on sargassum and oil spill monitoring

Cartagena, Colombia, May 2018 — In recent years, the Caribbean region has faced challenges from oil spills and an influx of floating sargassum seaweed. Large-scale oil spill incidents have included an April 2017 spill at Pointe-à-Pierre, Trinidad and Tobago and a July 2017 oil spill in Kingston Harbor, Jamaica. Illegal dumping of oil-contaminated waste by ships operating in the region is also a common occurrence. An increase in the frequency and volume of sargassum beachings and coastal overabundance has caused another challenge for the region with mats preventing the deployment and retrieval of fishing gear and clogging popular beaches, harbors and bays.

Based on the amounts of sargassum detected in the Central West Atlantic and the Caribbean and in January – April 2018, researchers at the University of South Florida (USF) predict high amounts of sargassum in Caribbean in coming months. According to USF’s Dr. Chaunmin Hu, “Because sargassum in the central west Atlantic is transported to the Caribbean by ocean currents, the high amounts of sargassum observed in these areas in recent months indicate that the summer months of 2018 may see sargassum amounts in the Caribbean exceeding the record-high in 2015. The reasons behind these record-high blooms, however, are still unclear.”
Forty experts from various United Nations entities, academia, governments, private companies and international initiatives met at the Ministry of Education in Mexico City from May 2 - 4 to discuss the development of a region-wide system for monitoring and forecasting oil spills and sargassum.

The workshop was organized by IOCARIBE of IOC UNESCO and its Global Ocean Observing System Regional Alliance, IOCARIBE-GOOS, and the GEO Blue Planet Initiative, and was hosted by the Ministry of Education of Mexico and Mexico National Council of Sciences. Over the coming months, the workshop organizers will be working with partners to begin implementation of the service and to identify long-term funding for the project.
At the workshop, experts reviewed the existing technologies and challenges for monitoring and forecasting oil spills and sargassum in the Caribbean and adjacent regions and put together a plan to create an information system based on existing efforts. The system will help to inform local governments and communities so they are able to prepare for and respond appropriately to spills and sargassum events.

According to the Organisation of East Caribbean States, which attended the workshop, the system will also support member states in unlocking sustainable benefits from the ocean and building resilience, managing for uncertainty and preserving and protecting the marine environment.

If you would like more information about this workshop, please contact Cesar Toro, IOC of UNESCO Sub-Commission for the Caribbean and Adjacent Regions. Phone: +57 5 6640955, Email c.toro@unesco.org, Douglas Wilson, doug@coastaloceanobs.com and Emily Smail, esmail@umd.edu.