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The Florida Times-Union

June 13, 2008

Scientists buoyed by buoy project to measure rivers, sea

By **DREW DIXON**,
The Times-Union

Scientists say a new buoy deployed Friday will help them determine how the ocean and the Nassau and St. Johns rivers impact each other.

The Coast Guard Cutter Maria Bray took the buoy about 5 miles off the coast of Mayport and moored it to an anchor in 60 feet of water. There, the buoy will measure currents and other influences from the two rivers.

Pat Welsh, executive director of the Advanced Weather Information Systems Lab at the University of North Florida, is the local manager of the project and said it's entering new areas of ocean study.

"We don't know much about how the rivers impact the ocean. ... We have very little data on that historically," Welsh said.

The 1,500-pound buoy project costs about \$200,000 and is funded through the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. But it's part of a new initiative by UNF and the Florida Coastal Ocean Observing System Consortium to find out how the rivers impact local waters just off the coast and how the ocean impacts the health of the waterways.

Welsh said some of the data from the project will likely be available on the Internet soon and the project is only funded to last into the fall.

The buoy deployed Friday is not part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration buoy network that measures wave data and other weather influences, such as the one 20 miles off the shore of St. Augustine. But Welsh said some of the data may eventually be linked to the NOAA system.

Jyotika Virmani, executive director for the consortium consisting of 18 universities and private nautical companies, said about 40 buoys are being deployed throughout Florida coastal waters. Some have already been moored off Florida's west coast and in the Keys.

Virmani said it's not clear what will result from the new buoy project off Mayport.

"It may take three or four years, but it may be used to predict those types of events, for example, where

the nutrients are coming from to cause a bloom. This is the beginning so it's hard to see where that's going to end," Virmani said.

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