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Port Times Record

NY Sea Grant funds local research projects

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By Elana Glowatz

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Streaks of red tide in Cutchogue Harbor. A Stony Brook research team will focus on how blooms of red tide impact the productivity of commercially important species of clams. Photo by Chris Pickerell

April 11, 2012 | 05:03 PM

Five Stony Brook University-based research projects covering topics as diverse as storm surges and mercury concentrations in fish are receiving a large chunk of federal funding from New York Sea Grant to fund research and education.

Together, the Stony Brook projects are receiving about \$560,000 through the end of 2012, and will get roughly the same amount next year, according to Barbara Branca, New York Sea Grant communications manager. The amount is a share of \$2.4 million in funding NYSG awarded to projects throughout the region.

One of the projects is about understanding what types of storms are the most dangerous for Long Island and New York City and how they can be predicted. Malcolm Bowman, of the university's Storm Surge Research Group, said in a phone interview Friday that the NYSG funding will link his group to the National Weather Service and the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, N.J., "combining skills and talent" to better forecast storm information and put it online.

Bowman said his research group learns from previous storm events, gathers data from media reports and tide gages and looks for hurricanes making their way up the East Coast toward Long Island. "It's an art more than a science in a way. ... Every storm has its own personality. Every storm has its own signature."

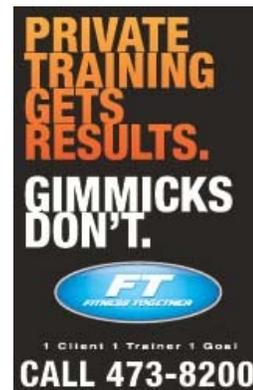
One of the benefits of this project would be the ability to give emergency

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management officials more accurate information about storms so they will know whether to order an evacuation.

Another of the Stony Brook projects will look at red tide and its impact on the productivity of clams. According to a press release from the university, the red tide organism, which has been observed in the Northport-Huntington Bay estuary, "produces paralytic shellfish toxin which has been detected in hard- and soft-shell clams, raising health concerns." The research will help the state Department of Environmental Conservation and shellfish growers and harvesters make management decisions.

Nitrate is another compound that can cause environmental problems, and it is a focus of one of the university projects. Researchers will study how various environmental changes impact the ability of wetland ecosystems to remove the compound from surface water and groundwater. The press release said one of the goals of the project is to "predict the amount of nitrogen that can be removed in a wetland based on the vegetation and community structure."

Nicholas Fisher, a professor at the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences, is studying the presence of a toxic form of mercury — methylmercury — in seafood. "Mercury acts primarily as a nerve poison," Fisher said in a phone interview Monday, and safe levels of consumption vary based on factors such as the consumer's age and whether the person is pregnant.

He is working to compile and analyze data on mercury concentrations in seafood to inform the public. He will also measure mercury concentrations in Long Island fish and compare levels to those in other locations around the country and the world. One of the things researchers will look at is how the concentrations vary based on geography, species and the sex and age of the fish.

The final Stony Brook project receiving NYSG funding involves evaluating local efforts to restore fish passage in small river systems. According to the press release, the research will focus on migratory fish species in the Carmans River, such as alewife, American eel and brook trout. The researchers will determine whether the fish are utilizing the passages and if the restoration increases fish productivity.

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