

Auditors question contracts in UMass-Dartmouth research project

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By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff | December 12, 2007

A \$12.5 million marine research project run by the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth has been plagued by questionable costs, no-bid contracts, and potential conflicts of interest, state auditors have found.

The university has spent more than \$600,000 in dubious contract costs because of lax oversight and steered more than \$800,000 in project funds to a close associate of the lead researcher in the ongoing project, according to a two-year audit released yesterday that covered 2002 through 2005. In several instances, there were no written contracts or documented charges.

Auditor A. Joseph DeNucci found what he described as inappropriate ties between UMass-Dartmouth researchers and the primary subcontractor on the project, Applied Coastal Research and Engineering.

The lead researcher, Brian Howes, a professor in the university's School of Marine Science and Technology, runs an environmental consulting company that shares a Mashpee address with Applied Coastal Research and Engineering.

Howes did not disclose his relationship with the subcontractor to university officials, auditors found. Applied Coastal Research had previously hired Howes to provide consulting services at a rate of \$97 an hour.

State auditors said the relationship represented a potential conflict of interest that called into question the integrity of the bidding process. But UMass-Dartmouth officials denied charges of improper favoritism and said the auditor's office misinterpreted the relationship with an Applied Coastal scientist, John Ramsey.

"They consider it a contractor-subcontractor issue, but we consider it as a scientific collaboration," said John Hoey, a university spokesman. "They created a unique computer model to do exactly this kind of work. Without it, the project wouldn't exist."

Howes said his partnership with Ramsey, the lead scientist at Applied Coastal, was central to the project.

"This is typical in a research environment," he said. "I've never had a business relationship with them. There is no quid pro quo."

Ramsey said that the auditor's office underestimated the extent of his involvement in the project and that Howes's office in his building was merely a "mail drop."

The project, a sweeping effort to protect 89 estuaries along the southern Massachusetts coastline, began five years ago in conjunction with state environmental officials and is slated to continue for another five years. The computer model, designed by Howes and Ramsey, more accurately measures the extent of environmental pollution and the cost of remediation, Hoey said.

The project is designed to identify the causes of the invasive weed growth that is choking aquatic life in harbors and bays. The nutrients that feed these algae and weeds come primarily from wastewater and rainwater run-off that includes lawn fertilizer.

Hoey said the university has tightened its oversight of the project but there was no funding that was unaccounted for. The faculty members will not be disciplined and Applied Coastal Research will probably continue to receive grants, Hoey said. He said the university had made it clear in reports and applications for funding that the scientific team included Ramsey. ■