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FORT MYERS BEACH

OBSERVER





PHOTO BY VIVIAN MCMAHON
This space-age-looking contraption at Big Carlos Pass can fool lightning, transmit radio signals, and measure rainfall, humidity, temperature and barometric pressure.

New equipment to aid rescue agencies

• Water quality and weather measurement devices will keep emergency management agencies one step ahead.

By VIVIAN MCMAHON
Observer Staff Writer

Science is descending on Southwest Florida waters in a big way this week with new weather and water quality sensing equipment being installed at Big Carlos Pass and at Redfish Pass. The new equipment will give Lee County emergency management agencies a heads up when possibly dangerous conditions exist.

Cliff Merz, founder of the program, is an engineer and researcher with the University of South Florida College of Marine Sciences. Merz has spent the last week installing, wiring and grounding highly sensi-

tive monitors which will gauge wind speed, water temperature, rainfall, barometric pressure, salinity levels and water levels. The data will be conveyed to a satellite and will then be downloaded to the Web site of the Coastal Ocean Monitoring and Prediction System at www.comps.marine.usf.edu, where the public can access real-time Gulf and bay conditions.

Merz estimated that data will be available on the Web site in about two weeks, after installation and preliminary testing of the systems is complete. Once that is accomplished, Merz will begin the installation of the Redfish Pass equipment.

The COMPS site also has data links to other research by both governmental and private agencies, including data from radar, US Geological Survey, as well as updates on red tide.

The Big Carlos site, near the

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PHOTO BY VIVIAN MCMAHON
Engineer Cliff Merz spent last week installing monitoring equipment at Big Carlos Pass.

bridge tender's office on the Big Carlos Pass bridge was originally erected by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection about 10 years ago. The DEP has since removed its equipment and abandoned the site.

The university has similar equipment from Tallahassee to the Florida Keys. Data to the local sites is updated on an hourly basis, while emergency management teams get updates every six minutes.

In collaboration with numerous federal, state and local agencies, the COMPS program's offshore buoys and onshore towers will measure water and meteorological conditions in an effort to predict storm surges and other conditions which would be of concern to emergency services.

The Big Carlos installation is the 12th by USF onshore, and is a self-contained data collection unit, using only solar-pow-

ered rechargeable batteries for energy.

The COMPS program, according to Merz, is also creating a model of many factors in the Gulf of Mexico such as coastal ocean dynamics, beach erosion and the movement of sediment. The data also can be used for environmental protection and red tide research.

Merz said that while the data collection is localized to the Florida coast of the Gulf of Mexico, ideally and ultimately there should be a link established to water sensors worldwide.

He said that he has also been spending time giving presentations about the USF programs on marine research to groups around Florida.

For anyone interested in contacting Merz about a presentation, please e-mail him at the University of South Florida at cmorz@marine.usf.edu.