

# 2025 Annual Report



## Dauphin Island Sea Lab

Alabama Center for  
Marine Education and Research



# 2025 Overview



A sand sculpture created for the groundbreaking of the new dormitory. (Courtesy Rogers & Willard)

Our core mission remains focused on conducting transformative ocean and coastal research and education. Each milestone highlighted in this year's annual report affirms our enduring commitment to that mission.

In 2025, the Dauphin Island Sea Lab (DISL) marked a year of meaningful progress with two major investments in its future: the groundbreaking of a new student dormitory and the construction of a new research vessel. Together, these milestones will expand DISL's capacity to support immersive education, field-

based research, and long-term coastal monitoring in the Gulf of America.

The year also saw increasing enrollment in our educational programs and attendance at Alabama's Official Aquarium, further fulfilling our founders' vision of delivering economical, high-quality academic experiences to learners of all ages.

Throughout the year, DISL scientists advanced groundbreaking research in coastal resilience, aquaculture, water quality, and fisheries, while education programs

continued to engage students and educators statewide through hands-on, experiential learning. These efforts were strengthened by partnerships with local agencies and stakeholders that amplified the reach and impact of DISL's science and outreach.

This annual report reflects a year of continued momentum made possible by the dedication of DISL's faculty, staff, students, partners, and supporters, and underscores our continued commitment to science, education, and wise stewardship of the Gulf Coast.



# New Dormitory Under Construction



An aerial view shows the footprint of the new dormitory. (Inset) Dignitaries and supporters mark the start of the construction project. (Below) Rendering of new dormitory. (Courtesy Rogers & Willard).

Ground was broken on November 18, for a new dormitory, significantly increasing our on-campus housing capacity for all of our programs. This new dormitory will also provide excellent support for hosting scientific meetings and housing visiting scientists conducting vital research in coastal Alabama.

"We appreciate the support of Governor Kay Ivey's office and our local elected officials in bringing this next chapter of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab to life. This new dormitory will be a valuable asset for our Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium (MESc) partners, statewide K-12 programs, and the community. Thank you again to all of our supporters," DISL Executive Director Dr. John Valentine said about the project.

The new dormitory is supported by the Alabama Legislature's

supplemental funding from the fiscal years' 2023, 2024, and 2025 Education Trust Fund budgets. Currently, only the first floor is fully funded. The second floor needs \$5 million to be completed.

The first floor will accommodate 61 students, with two beds per room and a single Resident Assistant room. The second floor, when completed, will add 18 two-bedroom apartments, bringing the total occupancy to 96 students. The groundbreaking was

attended by State Senator David Sessions, State Representative Chip Brown, Patty Etheridge, the Regional Director for Senator Tommy Tuberville, Chad Niblett, Community Relations Representative for U.S. Representative Barry Moore, Former U.S. Representative Jerry Carl, Dauphin Island Mayor Jeff Collier, the University of West Alabama President Todd Fritch, Ph.D., Goodwin Mills Caywood Representatives, and Rogers and Willard Representatives.



# New Vessel Taking Shape



A new 65-foot research vessel is taking shape at the Louisiana-based Aluma Shipyard.

Following the successful hull flip shortly after Thanksgiving, construction advanced rapidly with the installation of the cabin before the end of the year.

Once completed, this state-of-the-art vessel will be a game-changer for researchers and students throughout the MESOC, enabling overnight offshore operations and dramatically increasing time available for data collection. The vessel's extended range will allow investigators to strengthen research partnerships with state and federal agencies by eliminating the daily need to return to port, resulting in

significant savings of both time and research funds.

This vital project is made possible through funding support from the Gulf of Mexico Energy Securities Act.

The vessel's design was developed through the leadership and expertise of Senior Marine Scientist Dr. Jeffrey Krause and Marine Research Operations Supervisor Josh Goff, whose contributions to the design were instrumental in ensuring the vessel meets the evolving needs of our modern coastal and offshore research.

Completion is expected in late 2026.



The large photo shows the vessel with the cabin installed. The three smaller photos show the process of flipping the vessel after Thanksgiving. (Courtesy Aluma Shipyard)

# Discovery Lab Staffed



The Discovery Lab is a new, highly immersive, hands-on exhibit at the Alabama Aquarium.

It is designed to give our younger guests a deeper understanding of the surrounding ecosystem and the critical research conducted by the Sea Lab.

The exhibit offers them a chance to:

- To build an underwater Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV).
- Examine X-rays from the acclaimed Marine Mammal Research Program.
- Board a replica research vessel to explore the rich biodiversity of Mobile Bay.



Looking ahead, the Alabama Aquarium has exciting plans underway to expand the adventure into the deep sea, promising even more thrilling educational experiences for the future. The new exhibit is expected to be completed in 2027.

# Outdoor Classroom Prepped



The spaces for a brighter future are almost complete. Construction will be complete by Spring 2026 on the outdoor classroom adjacent to the scientific pool.

With the opening of the outdoor

pool classroom and the adjacent new pool, students can dive into unique, hands-on experiences designed to spark enthusiasm for STEM. This integrated environment will allow students to rapidly test and refine their designs,

making adjustments in real time without losing time between instructional stages.

The classroom will enhance the scientific diving program and marine tech support by providing space for equipment in close proximity to the pool area for testing and courses.

This learning space was made possible by a large group of donors through the Dauphin Island Sea Lab Foundation. A plaque will be placed on the classroom recognizing their contributions to the project.

# ARCOS Upgrades, App Launched

We are thrilled to tell you that the Alabama Real-Time Coastal Observing System (ARCOS) expanded its capabilities in 2025 by enhancing data collection across its weather station network and improving public access through the launch of a new ARCOS mobile app.

ARCOS stations are operated and maintained by DISL. They continue to provide real-time data on wind speed and direction, air and water temperature, salinity, dissolved oxygen levels, and tides.

The ARCOS app was released on July 14, just prior to the Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo, which sees an influx in boaters in coastal Alabama. Announcements describing the app were shared by coastal Alabama media, including AL.com and WPMI, and through DISL social media channels. Signs were also placed at boat ramps around the island with a QR code for boaters to easily access the download of the app. From July 14 to the 20, there were 1,774 downloads of the app.

The free app offers an accessible, reliable tool for anyone who works or recreates on the water. Boaters can use the app to make informed safety decisions, while anglers benefit from detailed salinity, oxygen, and tidal information to help identify optimal fishing



The West End Compass Point buoy is prepped to be launched.

opportunities. The upgrade and maintenance of the ARCOS web interface and launch of the app was supported by funding from the Alabama Center of Excellence.

New system enhancements included the addition of a three-day forecast from the National Weather Service, tide predictions from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for Dauphin Island, the redeployment of the West End Compass Point buoy, and the integration of wave measurements from a newly deployed Sofar Spotter buoy located just offshore.

The West End Compass buoy was relaunched just south of Dauphin Island's West End with upgrades to its satellite communication. Key contributors to this effort included AJ Stewart, a technician in Dr. Brian Dzwonkowski's Lab, and Sarah McCaffery, a Biological

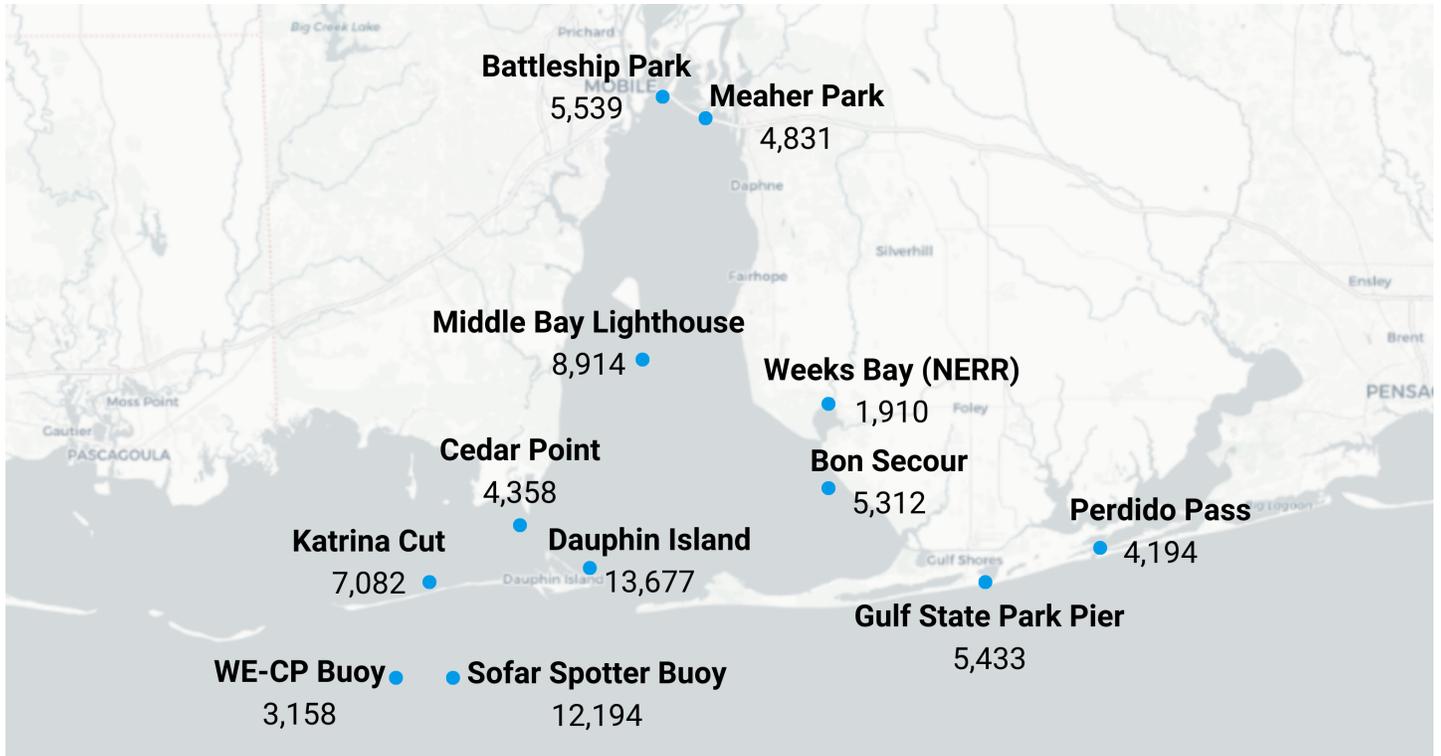
Opportunities and Training in Sciences intern in the same lab.

The Sofar Spotter buoy, deployed near the WE-CP buoy, measures wave height, wave direction, surface temperature, and water pressure. In addition to providing critical sea-state conditions at the mouth of Mobile Bay. Data from this buoy will enhance understanding of regional wave climate, improve rip current prediction, and increase the safety of marine operations.

The redeployment of the West End Compass Point buoy and the Sofar Spotter buoy was made possible with support from the Gulf of America Coastal Ocean Observing System.

Supported by the launch of the ARCOS app, traffic to the website grew by 114 percent with 162,068 page views in 2025.

# 2025 ARCOS Website Traffic by Weather Station



The Middle Bay Lighthouse in Mobile Bay is a popular fishing spot and also one of the twelve ARCOS weather stations that relay information every thirty minutes to the ARCOS website. (Photo Courtesy, Tony Moss)

Improve your access to water conditions by downloading the ARCOS app with the QR code below.

# University Programs



Liz Wang, University of Alabama at Birmingham, gathers samples during the Introduction to Oceanography course taught during the first summer session.

DISL's University Programs has educational opportunities for students to stay ahead of the evolving academic landscape. By partnering with the MESC's 21 member colleges, DISL now offers science majors specialized, hands-on field learning experiences that connect classroom instruction with real-world coastal research.

## Spring Term Grows

The spring term, introduced in 2023, experienced significant growth, increasing enrollment by 75 % compared to 2024. Students were from the University of South Alabama, Spring Hill College, University of Alabama-Huntsville, University of Alabama, University of North Alabama, and Troy University.

## Summer Session on Par

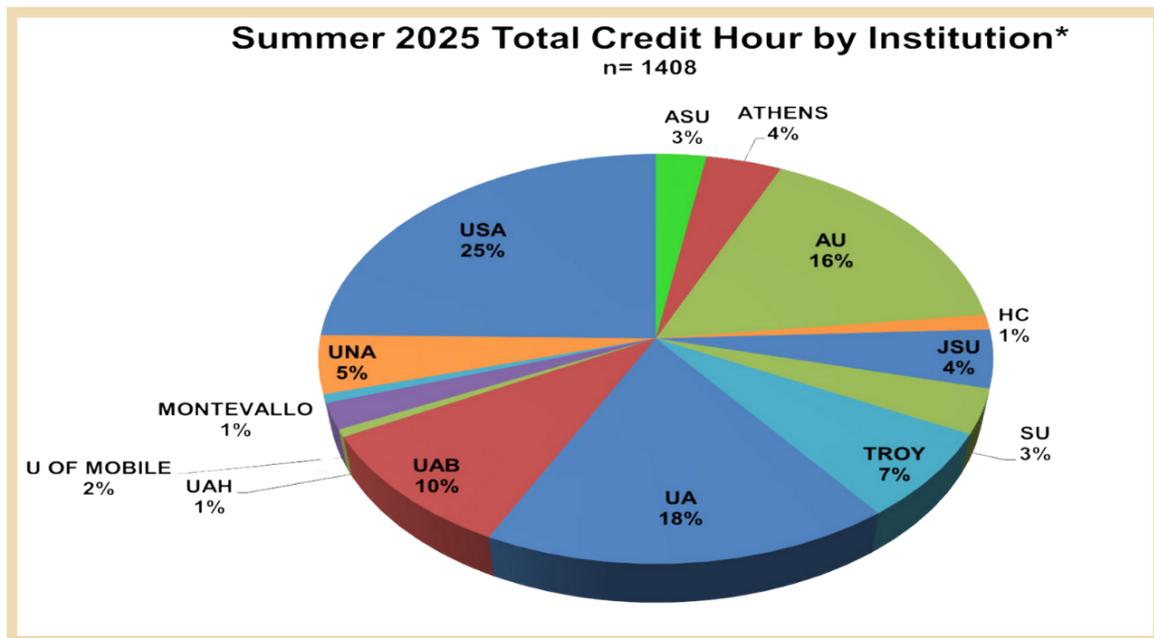
The traditional summer session awarded 1,408 credit hours to students from 15 of DISL's 21 member institutions.

To ensure access and affordability, scholarships and work-study positions were made available to assist students with tuition, housing, and board.

The DISL Foundation awarded 13 scholarships, including the George Cline Scholarship, which is presented annually to a student at Jacksonville State University.

## Summer Scholarship Recipients

- Addison Williams, UA
- Amber Tannehill, USA
- Emma Kane, Auburn
- Haleigh Martin, Troy
- Jordan Ward, UM
- Madison Dorsey, Samford
- Megan Hansen, UA
- Natalie Holt, UNA
- Sailor Reynolds, Auburn
- Sophia Sharp, UAB
- Loren Mosley, JSU
- Tiffany Smith, UNA
- Morrigan Singleton, UAB





The inaugural BOATS cohort: Erik Griggs (University of North Alabama; Powers Lab), Sarah McCaffrey (University of Georgia; Dzwonkowski Lab), Taniya Johnson (East Carolina University; Carmichael Lab), Greer Handley (Louisiana Tech University; Tarnecki Lab), Adelaide Tomerlin (University of Hawaii; Titus Lab), Heaven Pollard (Alabama A&M University; Kiel Reese Lab), Kelly Lesnik (Juniata College; Lehrter Lab), and Katherine Yang (Williams College; Robertson Lab).

The Sea Lab is committed to providing workforce development opportunities.

### New Internship Program

Eight students took part in University Programs new National Science Foundation funded Research and Mentoring for Postbaccalaureates program. The Biological Opportunities and Training in Sciences (BOATS) program enhances professional development and research training to support future career pathways. Each participant spent a full year developing and conducting an independent research project alongside a faculty mentor.

BOATS participants presented their research during a symposium in December, and several also shared their work at the Coastal and Estuarine Research Federation Conference held in Richmond,

Virginia, in November.

### NSF-REU Program Continues

Eight other students also participated in the NSF-funded Research Experiences for Undergraduates program. During the 12-week summer session, students conducted independent research projects



The 2025 REU Program included Sophia Corde (Mentor) Cole Bartuska (Oregon State University; Kiel Reese Lab), Edward Sullivan (University of South Alabama; Martin Lab), Herra Immandi (Arizona State University; Krause Lab), Kiara Buie (University of West Florida; Smee Lab), Trinity Henry-Jack (California State University; Baker Lab), Abby Yuen (California State Polytechnic University Pomona; Titus Lab), Steven Vrolijk (Towson University; Martin Lab), Daniela Payan Arias (Universtiy of Puerto Rico Mayaguez Campus; Carmichael Lab), and Dr. Ruth Carmichael (REU Coordinator).

across a range of marine science topics with the support of faculty mentors. They presented their research during a symposium in August. The program was led by University of South Alabama and DSL faculty member Dr. Ruth Carmichael, with assistance from Ph.D. student Sophia Corde.

Both programs are funded again for the 2026 year.

In addition to strengthening their research portfolios, several participants continued working at DSL as interns or technicians. BOATS participants hired included Johnson in the Carmichael Lab, Yang in the Robertson Lab, and Lesnik in the Smee Lab. REUs who will continue their work include Sullivan and Hall in the Martin Lab and Tucker in the Carmichael Lab.

## Science Conferences

Consistent with our mission statement, faculty and students presented the findings of their research at eleven worldwide science conferences. There were more than 50 presentations focused on coastal resilience, water quality, ecology, biology, and biogeochemistry shared.

These conferences serve as a vital link fostering new research partnerships. The meetings included:

- Coastal and Estuarine Research Federation Conference
- Benthic Ecology Meeting
- Bays and Bayous Symposium
- Gulf Estuarine Research Society
- Goldschmidt Conference
- Coastal Ocean Dynamics Gordon Research Conference
- Gulf of America Alliance Conference
- American Fisheries Society Conference
- Alabama Water Resources Conference
- Ocean Carbon and Biogeochemistry Leaky Deltas Meeting
- American Geophysical Union Conference

## New Faculty



Dr. Katrina Phillips

Expanding its research expertise, University Programs welcomed the addition of new faculty member Dr. Katrina Phillips in August. Phillips is a marine ecologist whose research specializes in the analysis of animal movements and population connectivity. Her research utilizes spatial and molecular tools to address key ecological questions in marine environments, with emphasis on sea turtles.

## Faculty Recognition

Current DISL faculty, Dr. Jeffrey Krause, was presented with the Excellence in Graduate Student Mentoring Award at the University of South Alabama's College of Arts and Sciences Dean's Lecture and Faculty Awards.



Dr. Jeffrey Krause helps McDonald County, Missouri students collect water samples during an exploratory field trip with their science teacher,

Dr. Krause established a collaborative project with science teacher Keith Jones, who teaches at McDonald County High School in Missouri. Jones' partnered with Krause's lab to provide his students with hands-on marine biology experiences, and to see firsthand how their streams and rivers connect to the Gulf of America. Krause led the students on an exploratory trip on the Research Vessel Alabama Discovery, and worked with the students virtually on their research posters. The collaboration earned Jones the Southwest Center for Educational Excellence in McDonald County, Missouri.



Devanarayana Rao, a student in Dr. Brian Dzwonkowski's lab, attended the 2025 Summer School on Acoustics, hosted by the NSF Ocean Observatories Initiative Facility Board at the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington. The workshop focused on using ocean acoustic data to study marine mammal and fish behavior, habitat mapping, earthquakes, ship-vessel noise pollution, glider acoustics, and physical oceanography. Topics that closely align with Sea Lab research priorities.

# Research



The AquaFort built for the integrated multi-trophic aquaculture project is put in place by the team in December 2025.

Research at the DISL continues to advance understanding of Gulf Coast ecosystems while addressing real-world challenges facing coastal communities. Faculty, students, and research staff lead studies in fisheries science, marine ecology, oceanography, biogeochemistry, marine mammal health, and climate resilience.

Through partnerships with state and federal agencies, academic institutions, and local stakeholders, DISL delivers science that informs conservation, habitat restoration, and resource management decisions.

By integrating hands-on research with undergraduate and graduate training, DISL prepares the next generation

of marine scientists while providing trusted, data-driven solutions for Alabama's coastal future.

## **IMTA Collaboration**

DISL Biologist Dr. Ashley McDonald is leading the way with the integrated multi-trophic aquaculture (IMTA) project. This collaboration of DISL, the University of New Hampshire (UNH), and the University of Southern Mississippi's Thad Cochran Marine Aquaculture Center, reached a key milestone in December with deployment of the AquaFort. Developed by UNH with NOAA funding, the two-bay offshore system is designed to raise finfish alongside oysters and local red seaweed, integrating aquaculture, ocean engineering, and coastal science.

The platform is expected to serve as a model for sustainable, low-impact offshore farming in the Gulf of America, with fish stocking anticipated in spring 2026.

## **Living Shorelines and Habitat Restoration**

Dr. Ron Baker's lab projects included the monitoring and technique analysis of several living shoreline restoration projects in coastal Alabama and the Florida Panhandle.

Living shorelines are dynamic coastal protection strategies that incorporate natural materials and habitats to stabilize vulnerable areas. Marsh grasses anchor sediment in place while creating critical nursery habitat, and oyster reefs provide additional habitat while reducing wave energy to

(cont.)

protect adjacent shorelines. These projects were monitored at multiple sites, including Graveline and Aloe Bays on Dauphin Island, Walker and Robertson Islands in Lower Perdido Bay, and Pensacola Bay.

### Reverse Weathering

Dr. Jeffrey Krause played a key role in two published studies that reshaped the scientific community’s understanding of reverse weathering. For decades, scientists believed the process was too slow to meaningfully influence environmental change on short time scales. However, these new findings demonstrate both how rapidly reverse weathering can occur and the important biological drivers behind it. The studies were published in Science Advances and Communications Earth & Environment.

The datasets generated through this work helped to secure funding for a new collaboration among experts in silica cycling and sediment microbiology, advancing research into the critical role microbes play in reverse weathering.

### Scientific Diving

Participation in the Scientific Diving Program has increased steadily year over year with 77 percent more dives. The program supports research, education, and monitoring

activities conducted in coastal and offshore environments of the northern Gulf of America.

New training opportunities for students and faculty in 2025 included Divemaster training, experienced diver qualification, and snorkel trainer courses.

These trainings enhance the Sea Lab’s capacity to study and protect coastal and marine ecosystems while fostering the next generation of skilled marine scientists.

### Marine Mammal Research Program

The Manatee Sighting Network recorded 434 manatee sightings during the year, with approximately half reported in Alabama, and coordinated the rescue of one manatee. The 9-foot, 855-pound male manatee later named OWA was rescued on New Year’s Day with assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, SeaWorld Orlando, Gulfworld Marine Institute, and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. OWA was released in Crystal River, Florida, in April 2025.

The Alabama Marine Mammal Stranding Network (ALMMSN) responded to 48 cetacean strandings, including three live bottlenose dolphins, and 10 manatee strandings, three of which were live. Researchers conducted necropsies on 35 cetaceans and eight manatees,

yielding valuable data on animal health and environmental conditions.

ALMMSN’s response efforts are supported by trained volunteers and partner agencies. An introductory volunteer training was held in October with 21 participants, followed by a skills refresher for Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Marine Resources Officers in November.

### Federal Grants

Federal grants supplement the research and educational programs at DISL.

The funding agencies listed below provided grant monies in the 2025 fiscal year.

Environmental Protection Agency  
\$1,889,538.41

Nat’l Aeronautics & Space Admin.  
\$56,655.13

National Science Foundation  
\$1,593,679.37

U.S. Dept. of Commerce  
\$1,641,875.45

U.S. Dept. of Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council  
\$665,524.12

U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services  
\$108,568.33

U.S. Dept. of the Interior  
\$49,697.19

U.S. Dept. of the Treasury  
\$1,229,556.97

**Total \$13,082,367.46**

# 2025 Publications

- Ana M. M. Sequeira et al. (2025) Global tracking of marine megafauna space use reveals how to achieve conservation targets. *Science* 388,1086-1097. Full Open-Access Paper.
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# Alabama Center of Excellence



Andrew Balder (left) and Chris Anderson conduct field research at Dead Lake in Creola, Alabama. The team collected measurements and data as part of an ongoing environmental study. (Photo by Molly Bartels/Auburn University Photographic Services)

The first round of projects funded by the Alabama Center of Excellence is moving toward completion, with grant closeout for the ten multi-year awards beginning in January 2026. These awards required collaboration among at least two members of the Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium and focused on water quality, habitat availability, and oyster resilience in response to current and future stressors driven by variable climate conditions.

Established in 2019 by the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, under the United States Department of Treasury under RESTORE Act funding, the DISL was named the home of the Alabama Center of Excellence. ALCoE

implemented a competitive grant program using these RESTORE Act funds to support academic institutions in Alabama conducting cutting-edge, forward-looking scientific research in the north-central Gulf of America.

Data generated by the Center of Excellence-funded research will help provide science-driven solutions and management recommendations for current and future conditions in coastal Alabama ecosystems.

Water quality projects spanned issues ranging from private well owners in Mobile and Baldwin County (Dr. Ann Ojeda) to the impacts of saltwater intrusion on the Baldwin County Aquifer (Dr. Yong Zhang) to Hypoxia on the Alabama Shelf (Dr. Brian Dzwonkowski).

Habitat projects covered the tidally-influenced freshwater wetlands of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta (Dr. Chris Anderson), coastal marshes and community resilience to storms (Dr. Zutao Yang), shoreline resilience across Mobile Bay (Dr. Stephanie Patch), and manatee habitat use in Mobile Bay (Dr. Ruth Carmichael).

Finally, two projects focused on oyster resilience a changing ocean. (Dr. Jeffrey Krause and Dr. Kenneth Hoadley).

The first round of request for proposals produced more than 17 research articles, countless presentations at local, national, and international conferences, and provided opportunities for over 20 graduate students, so far. Projects are expected to have all data submitted to



Sierra Robertson, a Ph.D. student in Dr. Charles Martin's lab, deployed underwater microphones to compare the acoustics of different coastal habitats. By pairing these acoustic recordings with habitat health measurements, including sediment cores and quadrat sampling, Robertson is helping reveal how ecological conditions influence the underwater sound environment.

DISL's Data Management Center by early 2026.

Contracting for the second round of projects was completed, and the eight projects are in various stages of progress. This round of

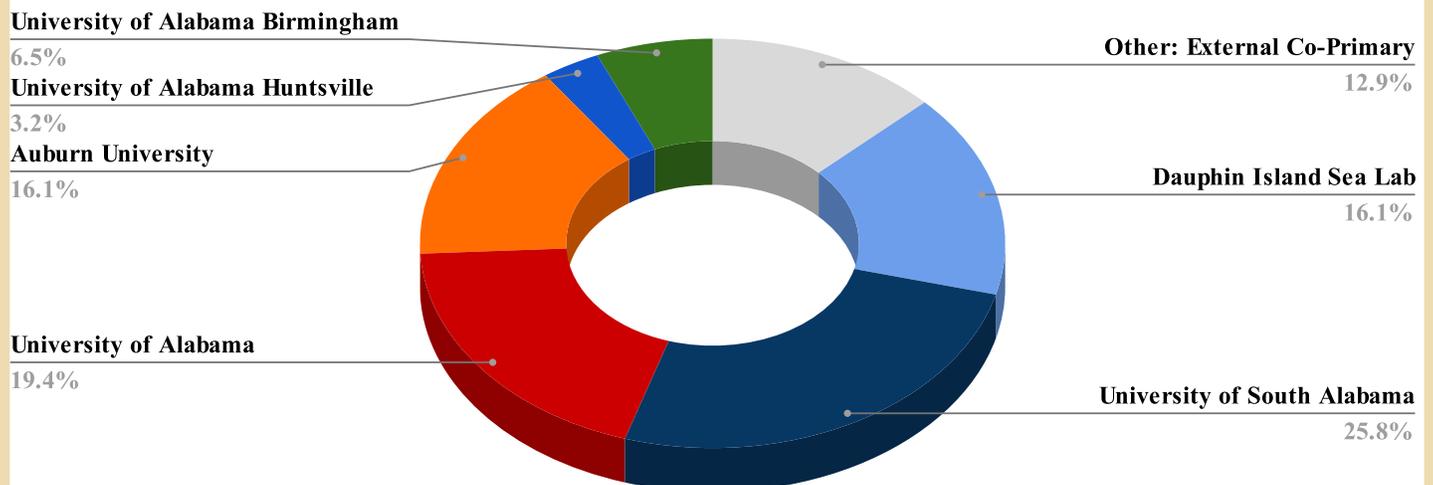
research projects explores how emerging technologies can enhance Alabama's monitoring capabilities and help address important emerging issues facing our coastal bays and waterways. This funding supports proof-of-concept

research over 18 months.

Projects are exploring underwater sounds to monitor fish (Dr. Charlie Martin), indentifying fish species by their otoliths using artificial intelligence (Dr. Ron Baker), monitoring essential terrapin habitat with drones (Dr. Thane Whibbels), using micro-mill technology to explore apple snail life history (Dr. Fred Andrus), and investigating oyster drill populations across the Gulf through an emerging genetic analysis (Dr. Lee Smee).

An additional three projects use satellite imagery and computer modeling to investigate water quality throughout Mobile Bay (Dr. Hongxing Liu), identify localized sediment plumes (Dr. John Lehrter), and monitor wetland health of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta (Dr. Gabriel de Oliveira).

### ALCoE Funding Distribution Over ALL Request for Proposals



The pie chart breaks down the funding distribution to MESC members in the first and second round of proposal requests.

# Discovery Hall Programs



Students from St. Luke's Episcopal School in Mobile, Alabama, learn about measuring shoreline changes during their field trip.

Discovery Hall Programs (DHP) offers classes, field trips, and summer programs for K–12 students and educators, using hands-on learning to promote ocean conservation and increase public awareness. DHP shared its expertise and helped the Alabama State Department of Education rewrite the marine science class standards for Alabama.

## Academic Year Connection

During the academic year, 7,206 students participated in DHP classes, with 75% representing public and private Alabama schools. Educators taught 789 standards-aligned classes to students from seven states, providing teachers with hands-on and immersive ways to reinforce textbook lessons.

## BayMobile Adds Visits

DHP's traveling classroom, the BayMobile, expanded its outreach, visiting 45% more schools than in 2024. Created in 2002 to reach Alabama schools unable to travel, the BayMobile also delivers ocean science programming at community events such as Alabama STEAMfest and the Alabama LandTrust Nature Expo.

## Supporting Educators

Professional development workshops for formal and informal educators to strengthen their science instruction, included three in-person workshops brought together 70 participants from seven states to explore topics including ocean STEM, sea level rise, and NOAA ocean

exploration. Participants also received updated scientific resources and classroom materials for use in their classrooms.

## ROVing Success

Remotely operated vehicles remained a top draw in 2025 for STEM focused learning with DHP. This included the Go ROVing! Loaner program, funded by the Alabama STEM Council Scale Up initiative which allowed teachers and robotics coaches to borrow kits to build and operate ROVs with their students. More than 1,500 students benefited from this hands-on experience.

DHP also hosted two ROV competitions for students looking to advance their ROV skills. The single-day Alabama Regional SeaPerch Competition, co-hosted with UMS-Wright Preparatory in Mobile, held in February, welcomed 11 teams from six schools across Alabama and Mississippi. The students built their robots using SeaPerch kits to compete in the pool obstacle and mission courses. Rehobeth High School NJROTC from Dothan, Alabama, earned the regional champion title.

The multi-day Northern Gulf Coast Regional Marine Advanced Technology Education ROV Competition



7,206 Students  
Academic Year

51 BayMobile  
School Visits



70 Workshop  
Attendees

2 Competitions  
166 Participants



417 Summer  
Campers

takes the student ROV challenge a step further with custom-built ROVs. This year's MATE's competition mission tasks focused on shipwrecks, marine renewable energy, and vertical profiling floats. Sixteen teams from four states competed in the 12th annual event, with GEARS, Inc. from Eastwood Presbyterian Church School in Montgomery, Alabama, receiving top honors.

### Educator Continuing Education

Educator Taylor Kilgore took part in national Sea Grant's Aquaculture Academy. The opportunity included visiting research labs and commercial aquaculture sites in New Hampshire and North Carolina.

Educator JoAnn Moody kicked



Williamson High School student Jaylon Washington lends a hand during a summer camp shark dissection. Washington interned during the summer as part of the Mobile County Public School's Career Academies.

off the new Environmental Ambassador Program with Mobile County Title 1 Schools, B.C. Rain and Chickasaw. Through this program students will increase their environmental awareness and become advocates in their communities.

### Summer Camps Maxed Out

Summer programs were at capacity with 417 campers, which enhanced the experience for five interns. The interns, two college and three high school students, worked with DHP during single-day and overnight camps, educator workshops, and outreach events. These internships were an excellent opportunity to gain hands-on experience in environmental education and learn about the Gulf of America's ecosystems. This year's interns included Clara Kintner, North Carolina

State University; Emily Thomas, University of New England; Jaylon Washington, Williamson High School; Tucker Lewis and Iven Keomanyong, both from Alma Bryant High School. In the fall, DHP celebrated record attendance at Sea Stars Camp which is offered every other year for students aged 9 to 18 with developmental disabilities. About half of the nineteen campers plus their guardians were new to the weekend camp.

### Sea Stars Camp Grows

Donations and sponsors, including the Rotary Children's Foundation and the Krewe of Kindness, allow DISL to offer to offer this weekend experience at no cost to participants.

# Alabama Aquarium



Scientific diving students carve pumpkins while in the Mobile Bay tank on October 23 while several children watch.

The Alabama Aquarium celebrated its second-highest attendance since opening in 1998 with some 111,000 visitors.

This achievement underscores the Aquarium's vital role in connecting the public to the Sea Lab's research, education, and conservation mission. Every visit directly supports efforts to protect the Gulf of America for future generations.

## Education Programs

The Aquarium's education program includes excursions for visitors to get a hands-on lesson in the habitats studied by Sea Lab researchers and students, as well as current scientific studies. More than 200 visitors participated in the excursion program in 2025, which includes field trips to the

salt marsh, beach, and maritime forest on Dauphin Island, along with guided tours of research laboratories.

Boardwalk Talks provided another avenue for engagement, connecting visitors directly with researchers and students.

Five talks were presented in 2025, welcoming over 100 participants. When permitted, talks are recorded and archived on the Sea Lab's YouTube channel. The Sharks of Alabama presentation alone generated an additional 327 online views.



Oak View Group volunteers assisted the master gardeners at the Alabama Aquarium in April to clean up the brush along the boardwalk.



Six-year-old Olivia donated her lemonade stand profit to feed the stingrays at the Alabama Aquarium. She had the chance to work with Aquarist Dakota Bilbrey for an afternoon to feed the stingrays.

### Volunteer Support

The Aquarium’s volunteer program contributed more than 5,000 volunteer hours from 93 dedicated docents. In addition to enhancing the visitor experience and supporting outreach events, the program includes campus gardeners who help maintain the grounds. Eighteen gardeners volunteered each Thursday and were also supported by volunteer groups from Alabama Power, Top Golf, and Oak View Group.

Scientific diving students entertained visitors during a unique underwater pumpkin-carving event in the Aquarium for the second consecutive year. Pumpkins were prepared at the surface so divers could focus on the creative challenge, working with thick gloves as they navigated the aquarium’s fish population. Dive Safety Officer Chris Rigaud and Director Mendel Graeber

provided live commentary and answered audience questions, and the event was streamed on the Sea Lab’s YouTube channel.

### Feeding the Rays

Community support was also highlighted through a special act of generosity from six-year-old Olivia, a frequent Aquarium visitor and stingray enthusiast. With help from her family, Olivia hosted a lemonade stand that raised \$55, which she donated to support the Rays of the Bay tank residents. Olivia’s family is a long-time member of the Friends of the Sea Lab.

The Friends of the Sea Lab membership program provides another avenue for visitors to support the Aquarium and includes free annual admission. In 2025, the Dauphin Island Sea Lab Foundation reported 274 Friends of the Sea Lab members.



111,495 Visitors

5,013 Volunteer Hours



100 Boardwalk Talk Participants

205 Excursion Participants



### Graeber named Alabama Aquarium Director



For the first time in Aquarium history, leadership was passed to Mendel Graeber, who succeeded Robert Dixon. Graeber’s connection to DISL began as a high school student. She joined the Sea Lab as a Discovery Hall Programs’ educator in 2002 and was named Aquarium Educator in 2007.

# Mobile Bay National Estuary Program



The MBNEP hosted the Association of National Estuary Programs Tech Transfer in November. The annual event is an opportunity for National Estuary Programs around the country to exchange ideas, technology, and success stories from each of their programs.

Collaboration and shared leadership across coastal Alabama defined the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program's work. While the MBNEP Management Conference, consisting of more than 300 community leaders from government, academia, nonprofit organizations, the private sector, and the public, devoted significant effort to developing *The Waters We Share: A Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan for Alabama's Estuaries and Coast*, the program office advanced several major initiatives in parallel.

In addition to adopting the updated CCMP, which will guide MBNEP's work over the next decade and strengthen collaborative conservation efforts across coastal Alabama, the program completed a successful Environmental

Protection Agency Program Evaluation, hosted a national gathering of the Association of National Estuary Programs, and finalized the 2025 State of Alabama's Estuaries and Coast Report.

The EPA Program Evaluation, conducted in the spring, affirmed MBNEP's continued progress in implementing its CCMP and rated the program proficient. The Program Evaluation Team highlighted the strength of internal coordination, noting:

*"The PE Team found collaboration within MBNEP to be well orchestrated and consistently maintained throughout the review period. The various CCMP Committees fulfilled their predetermined roles and worked well together to move projects forward."*

In November, MBNEP hosted a three-day technology transfer for the Association of National Estuary Programs in Mobile, providing an opportunity to showcase regional leadership, innovation, and successful restoration practices to national estuary programs from across the country.

Program accomplishments during 2025 spanned MBNEP's four pillars of measuring status and trends, ecosystem restoration, local capacity building, and education and involvement.

## Measuring Status and Trends

MBNEP, in partnership with the University of South Alabama's Dr. Alex Beebe, evaluated pre-restoration water quality conditions in the Magnolia River watershed using autonomous in situ monitoring equipment. This effort produced a technical report documenting baseline conditions to inform future restoration effectiveness assessments.

MBNEP also finalized the 2025 State of Alabama's Estuaries and Coast Report, the first such publication since 2008. The report provides the most comprehensive assessment of coastal conditions in more than fifteen years, integrating data on water quality, habitat health, fisheries, and coastal trends

to support informed decision making by residents, local leaders, and partners.

## Ecosystem Restoration

Significant restoration progress occurred across multiple watersheds. In Deer River, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers placed more than 240,000 cubic yards of material from the Mobile Harbor Project to create 19 acres of new marsh, advancing collaborative efforts to beneficially use dredged material.

In the Magnolia River watershed, construction was completed on two stream restoration projects totaling 4,031 linear feet of stabilized streambank to reduce sedimentation and habitat loss. The Schoolhouse Branch project represents the largest stream restoration effort completed in coastal Alabama. In Fowl River, MBNEP completed material placement and installation of timber breakwaters and riprap along five spits in the lower river, restoring 28 acres of marsh using approximately 50,000 cubic yards of dredged material. This effort marks the first local application of thin layer placement techniques to support marsh resilience and long-term sustainability. MBNEP also completed a shoreline management plan for Mobile County to guide future restoration efforts, living shoreline implementation, and coastal resource protection.



A 3D-printed artificial oyster reef, created using dredged sediment from Mobile Harbor, is being studied at an oyster farm on Dauphin Island. The reef provides oyster habitat while being evaluated for durability and environmental performance, supporting the sustainable, beneficial use of dredged material.

## Local Capacity Building

To strengthen local capacity across the region, MBNEP and partners hosted a sediment and erosion control workshop in November providing training and technical resources to 73 private sector, municipal, and academic resource managers. Participants learned about current best practices and observed field demonstrations of erosion and sediment control techniques.

MBNEP pursued continuous improvement through innovation by testing methods for three-dimensional printing of reef structures using

sediment dredged from Mobile Bay. This work evaluated feasibility, performance, and constructability with an emphasis on future scalability. The approach supports long term opportunities to couple beneficial use of dredged material with shoreline resilience, habitat enhancement, and cost-effective restoration solutions.

MBNEP's Community Action Committee supported grassroots engagement by awarding seven small grants totaling more than \$11,000 to organizations focused on community education and involvement.

## Education and Involvement

Public education and engagement remained central throughout the year. MBNEP staff participated in 29 community events, including the annual Alabama Coastal Cleanup, reaching residents, volunteers, students, and partner organizations across the region.

MBNEP also expanded the Trash Blows campaign in partnership with the Town of Dauphin Island and the Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo. The campaign reinforced consistent litter prevention messaging and increased public awareness of marine debris impacts across Alabama's coastal and estuarine environments.

The Mobile Bay National Estuary Program hosted the Association of National Estuary Programs Technical Transfer meeting, an annual forum that brings together National Estuary Programs from across the country to exchange ideas, technology, and successful strategies. Representatives from 28 estuaries nationwide spent the week learning from the innovative work being conducted along Alabama's coast through the MBNEP and its partners, highlighting the region's leadership in collaborative, science-based coastal stewardship.

Tours of Three Mile Creek and D'Olive Watersheds were

led by Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Commissioner Chris Blankenship, City of Mobile Director of Programs Jennifer Greene, Ellie Mallon with Osprey Initiative, Dr. Beebe with the University of South Alabama, Lee Walters with GMC Engineering, Mike McMillan, Jesi Ward and Troy Strunk with the City of Daphne, Trey Jinright with Jade Consulting, and Daphne Utilities.

## Community Recognition

Mobile Bay National Estuary Program Director Roberta Swann was honored with the Gulf Coast Marine Environmental Excellence

Award by the DISL Foundation. The award recognizes individuals who have made outstanding contributions to marine environmental stability along the Alabama Gulf Coast. This recognition reflects Swann's twenty-one years of leadership and dedicated service to coastal Alabama through the Mobile Bay NEP, advancing collaborative conservation, science-based management, and long-term stewardship of the region's vital coastal resources.

Swann announced her retirement from the MBNEP in the Fall. A national search committee was organized to fill her role.



MBNEP Director Roberta Swann received the Gulf Coast Marine Environmental Excellence Award at the annual Marine Environmental Awards Luncheon in October.

# Dauphin Island Sea Lab Foundation



The DISL Foundation supported the upgrade of microscopes for University Programs students. Thanks to donor support since 2019, there are now 29 new compound microscopes and 34 stereo microscopes available for use during class. There is also a new teaching microscope of each type with camera attachments and six boom stands for the stereo zoom bodies to allow for larger specimens to be viewed.

The Dauphin Island Sea Lab Foundation completed another successful year supporting the advancement of education and research at the Sea Lab. Now in its seventh year, DISLF continues to operate with the experienced leadership of Executive Director Helene Hassell, Assistant Director Angie Gaillard and Assistant to the Director Daphne Marcum.

The following DISLF report is an overview of the fiscal year beginning October 1, 2024, and ending September 30, 2025.

The DISLF hosted its signature fundraising and outreach efforts, including the Marine Environmental Awards

Luncheon, Cocktails with the Critters, and the Employee Campaign. All events were held in person, with the Cocktails with the Critters auction continuing as a successful virtual fundraiser. Ongoing donor outreach through mail and email communications supported strong fundraising results. The DISLF extends its sincere appreciation to the Board of Directors and Advisory Committee for their continued leadership and support.

Funds raised in the fiscal year by DISLF supported a wide range of initiatives across Discovery Hall Programs, University Programs, and campus-wide improvements.

These investments funded the following 15 projects.

## K-12/Discovery Hall Programs

- BayMobile
- Jenny Cook Memorial Scholarship
- ROV Competitions
- Sea Stars Program
- Computer Equipment

## Alabama Aquarium

- Discovery Lab

## University Programs

- 13 Scholarships
- New Microscopes
- Bays and Bayous Symposium (deGruy Scholarship)
- Alabama Marine Mammal Stranding Network
- Computer Equipment
- New van
- Hydrophones, Powers Lab

## Campus-wide

- Sun Sail Shades at Cafeteria
- New Aquatic Center Outdoor Classroom

Through strategic fundraising, strong partnerships, and dedicated leadership, the DISLF remains committed to supporting education, research, and conservation initiatives that strengthen coastal science and stewardship for future generations.



# Dauphin Island Sea Lab

Alabama Center for  
Marine Education and Research

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