

Two Scientists in Hot Water for Conspiracy to Steal Trade Secrets from The Water Institute of the Gulf to Benefit Another Research Institution

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A grand jury in the Middle District of Louisiana recently returned an indictment against two scientists for conspiracy to steal trade secrets, attempted trade secret theft, conspiracy to commit computer fraud, and computer fraud. All of the charges against Ehab Meselhe, an environmental scientist, and Kelin Hu, a computer scientist and Chinese citizen, relate to highly valuable and proprietary software they allegedly conspired to steal from their former employer, The Water Institute of the Gulf.

The indictment alleges that late last year, Meselhe left the Water Institute to work for another water research institution in Louisiana. After leaving the Water Institute, Meselhe allegedly schemed with former coworker Hu to steal the Basin Wide Model, a highly sensitive trade secret that projects how the natural environment of the Mississippi Delta would change over time. The two allegedly planned for Hu to obtain copies of the Basin Wide Model and related computer inputs, codes, files, and post-processing scripts before submitting his resignation to the Water Institute. Meselhe instructed Hu over Google Message about which files to copy, when to copy the files, and how to communicate with him to avoid detection. In exchange, Meselhe got approval for Hu to join the other water research institution at the start of 2019.

According to the Indictment, the Water Institute caught Hu in the act of downloading the Basin Wide Model and related files to personal computer devices on January 11, 2019, and immediately fired and escorted from the premises. Though the indictment does not name the other water research institution, Tulane University hired both Meselhe and Hu shortly they left the Water Institute to conduct similar water research. Tulane has stated that it will determine the status of Meselhe and Hu after an internal review.

The U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Louisiana applauded the investigation and emphasized that theft of propriety information will not be tolerated, “especially where the theft is from a research institution whose purpose is to study environmental impacts so that we can best protect our citizens from natural and man-made disasters and other coastal threats.”

TIP: The United States government remains committed to prosecuting theft of trade secrets, particularly where those trade secrets relate to a matter of public importance.

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