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EPA Denies Petition to Curb River Pollution ***Gulf Dead Zone Continues to Grow***

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has denied a petition to implement a clean-up plan for an aquatic Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico, despite heavy economic losses to the U.S. fishing industry and continued research that shows the Dead Zone has doubled in size since 1985. This week, scientists from the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium completed their annual measurement of the Gulf Dead Zone, which measured 6,765 square miles and is larger than the state of Connecticut.

The Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico is an area where there is not enough oxygen in the water to support marine life. It forms every summer, caused by high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus pollution draining from the Mississippi River watershed. The pollution comes from chemical fertilizer escaping farm fields, sewage treatment plant discharges, and polluted runoff from cities. These sources of pollution are from the 31 states that drain to the Mississippi River, but 9 states, including Iowa, are top polluters, contributing 75 percent of the pollution.

In 1998, the EPA called on states to adopt specific limits on nitrogen and phosphorus pollution and threatened to enact its own limits if states had not complied by 2003. Every state along the Mississippi River has ignored that and other deadlines set by EPA, but so far, the federal government has failed to step in as promised, to supply the needed protections. As a result, inland water pollution problems have multiplied while the Dead Zone makes its annual appearance—each time bringing with it damage to the coastal residents and their livelihood.

Yet just last week EPA denied a petition asking them to take action. The petition was filed in 2008 by a group of non-profits and legal centers called the Mississippi River Collaborative. It asked for immediate action to set numeric limits on Dead Zone-causing pollution in the Mississippi River and Gulf, as well as create an enforceable clean-up plan for the Dead Zone.

“States cannot effectively stem this problem alone. After years of lackluster and hodge-podge water pollution regulations among a few states, the Dead Zone is still growing. We need the EPA to provide leadership. Multistate concerns such as this are their responsibility.” said Susan

Heathcote, water program director for the non-profit Iowa Environmental Council, which is part of the Mississippi River Collaborative.

“The Dead Zone is detrimental to Gulf sea life and the coastal residents’ way of life, and yet EPA continues to rely on the states to do things they have failed to do for well over a decade,” said Matt Rota, Science and Water Policy Director for the Gulf Restoration Network.

Not only does the Dead Zone threaten the \$2.8 billion Gulf fishing industry, nitrogen and phosphorus pollution cause environmental problems in states throughout the entire Mississippi River Basin. For example, toxic algae blooms in waters of the states result in fish kills, the death of livestock and pets, and damage to drinking water supplies.

“Efforts now in Congress to cut funds for Farm Bill conservation programs—designed to prevent both cropland erosion and fertilizer run-off pollution—will only exacerbate the pollution in the river and the Dead Zone,” added Heathcote.

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The Iowa Environmental Council is an alliance of diverse organizations and individuals working together in public policy to provide a safe, healthy environment for current and future generations. www.iaenvironment.org

The Gulf Restoration Network (GRN) is a network of environmental, social justice, and citizens' groups and individuals committed to restoring the Gulf of Mexico to an ecologically and biologically sustainable condition. www.healthygulf.org

The Mississippi River Collaborative is a partnership of environmental organizations and legal centers from states bordering the Mississippi River as well as regional and national groups working on issues affecting the Mississippi River and its tributaries. The Collaborative harnesses the resources and expertise of its diverse organizations to comprehensively reduce pollution entering the Mississippi River as well as the Gulf of Mexico. www.msrivercollab.org