



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Mississippi River Collaborative Targets Solutions to the Dead Zone

Knoxville, TN, August 7, 2009 – Researchers from the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium on Monday July 27, 2009 reported on the size of the Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico. This summer it is 3,000 square miles, an area larger than the State of Delaware.

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 coming from the Mississippi River watershed. The nitrogen and phosphorus stimulate excessive growth of algae; when this algae dies, its decomposition uses up much of the oxygen in the water, which chokes marine life. The pollution comes from chemical fertilizer that runs off of farm fields, sewage treatment plants, and polluted runoff from cities. The pollution sources are along the entire length of the Mississippi River.

“The Dead Zone definitely has an effect on our livelihood, not only in its size, but where it shows up,” says Clint Guidry of the Louisiana Shrimp Association. “Not only does it kill everything around it, but if it doesn’t directly kill certain species, we’re finding that it has an impact on the fertility of some species—it’s causing low birthrates of some species.”

Last year a task force of federal and state agencies acknowledged the need to take action, and called for a cut of 45% of the nitrogen and phosphorus pollution into the Mississippi River. They set a goal of reducing the size of the Dead Zone to 2,000 square miles by 2015.

The first necessary step to achieve the reduction is to target Farm Bill subsidies for projects that reduce nitrogen and phosphorus pollution headed to the Gulf from farms, according to the Mississippi River Collaborative, a nine-state group of environmental organizations.

“The US Department of Agriculture must admit the role of Midwestern farmers in adding to the Dead Zone, and must support farmers’ efforts to reduce nitrogen and phosphorus pollution in the Mississippi River basin,” said Stacy James, Water Resources Scientist at Prairie Rivers Network in Champaign, IL. “Until we adopt significant measures to protect waterways from chemical fertilizer pollution, the Gulf Dead Zone will continue to be the toxic backfire resounding from the Midwest’s tailpipe.”

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Mississippi River Collaborative Targets Solutions to the Dead Zone (Continued)

The Mississippi River Collaborative is also calling for meaningful legal limits on Gulf pollution. The Clean Water Act requires each of the states in the Mississippi River Basin to develop limits for nitrogen and phosphorous levels in state waters. Thus far, none of the states bordering the Mississippi River have set these limits for the Mississippi River or the Gulf, and the US EPA has allowed these states to delay their responsibility. Once these limits are adopted, they can be used in pollution permits to require sewage treatment plants and industrial facilities to reduce their nitrogen and phosphorus pollution.

“One of the most expedient ways to limit pollution is through the National Pollution Discharge Elimination System permits,” says Dan Sherburne, Research Director, Missouri Coalition for the Environment. “These permits mandated by the Clean Water Act can eliminate pollution if permit writers require more stringent controls on pollution from industry and municipalities.”

To spur action on the issue, the Mississippi River Collaborative submitted a petition to the EPA in 2008 requesting that the agency set nitrogen and phosphorus limits for the Gulf of Mexico and is expecting the agency's response this summer.

“The problem is on the federal level. The farmers, in this economy, are doing everything they can do to use less fertilizer. We need federal projects to control fertilizer and municipal runoff,” says Mr. Guidry. “We need federal money for these projects and, with an environmentally-minded Congress and president, this is a fine time to get it done.”

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.

Participating members of the Mississippi River Collaborative are The Environmental Law & Policy Center, Gulf Restoration Network, Iowa Environmental Council, Kentucky Waterways Alliance, Louisiana Environmental Action Network, Midwest Environmental Advocates, Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, Missouri Coalition for the Environment, Prairie Rivers Network, Tennessee Clean Water Network, Tennessee Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, Tulane Environmental Law Clinic, and Washington University Interdisciplinary Environmental Clinic.

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