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# Whitehurst: Oysters, rivers and state government contradictions

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Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant recently announced the formation of the Governor's Oyster Council to help the coast's oyster industry restore a fishery that has been hurt and diminished over just a few years by hurricanes, the BP drilling disaster and its aftermath, and oyster reef mortality due to salinity changes. The fresh water from rivers feeding the bays and marshes on the coast has been one of the few reliable natural factors, but that could change if rivers continue to be dammed upstream.



Andrew Whitehurst  
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Tens of millions of dollars have been spent by the state's Marine Resources Department over the past decade to recover oyster production, and at least 50 million dollars of the early BP disaster restoration funds are planned for more oyster reef building and repair in Hancock County. This large project in Heron Bay is no more than two miles east of the mouth of the Pearl River. This region has historically supported some of the state's best oyster reefs. Fresh water from the Pearl mixes with water from the Mississippi Sound and oysters live in the resulting moderate salinities.

Without much fanfare, in May of 2013, the Mississippi Development Authority, under the direction of Gov. Bryant, gave \$1 million from the "Industry Incentive Finance Fund Program" to the Rankin Hinds Pearl River Flood and Drainage Control District. The purpose was to help the Rankin Hinds District pay some of the costs of a Feasibility Study and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for what is now being called the "One Lake Project" on the Pearl River in Jackson. If there was ever a question whether the project was for economic development or flood control, the MDA funding settles the matter. This is for industry and economic development. The Greater Jackson Chamber Partnership, a regional chamber of commerce, and its member businesses are all hanging their hats on a 10 year vision of having a riverfront for Jackson (Vision 2022). The lake is their centerpiece.

Adding another lake and dam downstream of the Ross Barnett Reservoir on the Pearl will withhold more river water, and has the potential to further change the volume and timing of the river flows that end in the Mississippi Sound and mix there to grow oysters and support marshes. One executive agency of the state is trying to grow oysters while another is helping dam the rivers that feed the oyster reefs. This is only one of many state government contradictions. One thing is certain: no matter how much money and expertise the Governor's Oyster Council expends improving oyster bottoms at the mouth of the Pearl River or elsewhere, that money will be wasted if fresh water output from coastal rivers doesn't support basic oyster biology.

On January 20th, the Mississippi Commission on Marine Resources which regulates and manages oyster harvest, went on record with a unanimous resolution opposing more damming on the Pearl or other rivers. It cited the economic effect to the oyster and seafood industry if fresh water flows are disrupted. With this Commission resolution, the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources is moving away from state agency contradictions, and that is a positive development. We cannot say whether this and other resolutions in opposition will convince Jackson's lake promoters that there are other paths to flood control than building more lakes on the Pearl River, but it is a start. The Feasibility Study and EIS for the One Lake project are expected to be published in April of this year.

***Andrew Whitehurst is Gulf Restoration Network's water policy director and works on Mississippi wetland and water issues.***

[BP oil spill](#), [Gov. Phil Bryant](#), [Governor's Oyster Council](#), [Greater Jackson Chamber Partnership](#), [Mississippi Commission on Marine Resources](#), [Mississippi Department of Marine Resources](#), [Mississippi Development Authority](#), [Mississippi Industry Incentive Finance Fund Program](#), [One Lake Project](#), [Rankin Hinds Pearl River Flood and Drainage Control District.](#), [Ross Barnett Reservoir](#), [The Mississippi Sound](#)



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