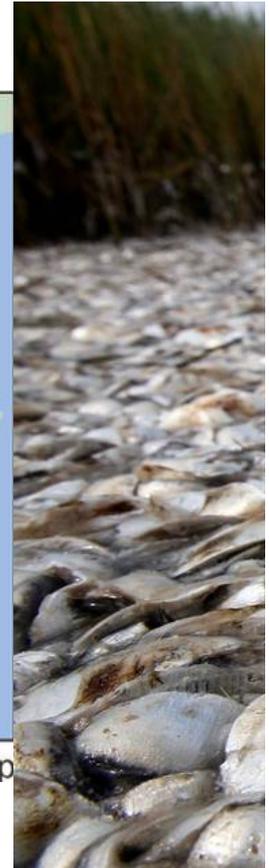


EPA fails again to meet dead zone goals set in 2001

HIGHLIGHTS

The newest dead zone projection shows the Environmental Protection Agency is far short of a major goal it set 15 years ago to reduce the zone in the Gulf of Mexico.



Source: Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium

Advocate map



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The newest dead zone projection shows the Environmental Protection Agency is far short of a major goal it set 15 years ago to reduce the zone in the Gulf of Mexico.

In 2001, the EPA pledged to reduce Mississippi River pollution, which is destroying aquatic life in the Gulf.

This year, the dead zone is the same size, or even slightly larger than in previous seasons, the Gulf Restoration Network pointed out in a press release Friday.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration forecasts a 5,898-square-mile low-oxygen area dev^x of marine life, -- about the size of Connecticut. Last year's dead zone was considered above average; it was forecast to be 5,483 square miles but measured 6,474 square miles.

"Of the hundreds of similarly polluted areas in the world, the dead zone off the Louisiana coast is the second largest, the Network said.

Although this year's forecast is the dead zone will be average size, it still far exceeds the EPA's national goal of having reduced the zone to 1,930 square miles -- a goal that's not going to be met because the amount of coming down the river, primarily from agricultural fertilizer, has not been reduced.

"In 2001, state and federal bureaucrats set a goal of reducing the size of the dead zone to 1,950 square miles by 2015," said Matt Rota, the Network's senior policy director. "Well, here we are at 2016, and we are over three times that goal."

The EPA announced in February 2015 it would simply move the goal posts, pushing the deadline to 2035. However, this announcement did not include any specific, new strategies for reaching the target, the Network said.

The dead zone is created when nitrogen flowing down the Mississippi feeds tiny plants, which fall to the Gulf floor when they die. The decomposition of these plants uses up oxygen in the lower water column. When the oxygen level gets low enough, the area is classified as hypoxic -- commonly known as a dead zone -- because the area can no longer support marine life.

"There's been no reduction in the amount of nitrogen coming out of the river," said Eugene Turner, professor at LSU's Department of Oceanography and Coastal Sciences and one of the scientists working on dead zone forecasts.

The Mississippi River Collaborative has warned the EPA for nearly a decade that relying on states to develop and enforce pollution protections does not clean the water. In 2012, members of the collaborative filed a lawsuit against the EPA for its refusal to set and enforce numeric standards for nitrogen and phosphorus pollution as required by the Clean Water Act. The EPA continues to fight the litigation.

Last year, Louisiana released a draft report to outline how the state would help reduce the amount of nitrogen in the Mississippi River as part of a larger effort to reduce the dead zone. The plan primarily relies on future diversions of water from the river into the marsh, where plants are expected to help remove the nitrogen.

However, critics say that plan doesn't go beyond what's already being done and doesn't have specific goals or timelines. Louisiana contributes very little in the way of nitrogen -- only 1.7 percent of the total the river carries to the Gulf. Most of the nitrogen comes from agricultural areas upriver.

Nevertheless, Turner said, the state could do more at both the federal and local levels to help upriver communities with their nitrogen-reducing efforts.

"The state's leadership on this is absent," he said.

The dead zone is measured in late July and results are released in August through work from the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium.

The forecast is done through NOAA funding to researchers at numerous universities and government agencies, including LSU, LUMCON, the University of Michigan, Texas A&M University, Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences/College of William and Mary, North Carolina State University and the United States Geological Survey.

Amy Wold, The New Orleans Advocate writer, contributed to this story.



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