



Mississippi River Network

Protecting the Land, Water, Wildlife, and People of America's Greatest River

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To: Members of the Gulf Hypoxia Task Force

Protecting and restoring the health of the Mississippi River and its wider water system is a primary mission of our organizations. The spread of hypoxia in the northern Gulf of Mexico involves that wider Mississippi River system, from source streams to coastal estuaries. Drinking water supplies upriver are being impacted by nutrient pollution along with Gulf fishery habitats, resulting in broad public support for addressing this problem.

The upcoming meeting of the Task Force (HTF) provides an important occasion for its member agencies and states to advance implementation of the *Action Plan for Reducing Hypoxia in the Gulf of Mexico*, and to inform the public about the specific steps that are being taken to achieve the Plan's goals.

Chief among those is the commitment by federal agencies and HTF states to achieve an Interim Target of reducing nitrogen and phosphorus loading to the Gulf by 20% by the year 2025, as a key step in reaching an average annual size of the Hypoxic Zone of 5000 square kilometers by the year 2035. The latter date represents a 20-year extension that the Task Force made to its initial commitment (in 2000) of achieving the 5000 square kilometer goal by 2015.

New opportunities have come from the passage by Congress of a new Farm Bill and Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) in 2018. The Conservation Programs in the Farm Bill and ecosystem restoration/natural infrastructure provisions in WRDA provide major tools for the Task Force to utilize in the Mississippi River Basin, which includes the Ohio and Missouri Rivers.

Our organizations have urged Congress to maintain full funding for the *Farm Bill Conservation Programs*, including:

- The USDA Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI), which continues to be a critically important program that targets upstream watersheds contributing nutrients that flow to the Gulf.
- The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), which has designated the Mississippi River Basin as a Critical Conservation Area (CCA), and the Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers (CLEAR) Initiative in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

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We have also advocated Congress for federal funding to support the *State Nutrient Strategies* that have been developed under the Action Plan, and will continue to do so. While these Strategies and their strengths vary from state to state, they are important components of the Action Plan that must be carried out if the Task Force is serious about reaching its Target and Goal. Several states have invested significant resources of their own into their Strategies, but all can benefit from federal financial support.

The 2018 WRDA bill contained authorizing language for ecosystem restoration programs in the Upper and Lower Mississippi River regions, as well as a requirement for the Corps of Engineers to consider natural infrastructure options when planning projects for flood control and risk reduction. These programs can also help improve water quality, and have gained added importance with the potential loss of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-led *Landscape Conservation Cooperatives*.

Congress permanently reauthorized the *Land and Water Conservation Fund* (LWCF) in February, which has protected wetlands and other natural areas along the river that help filter nutrient pollution, along with carrying floods during high water events like the one being experienced now. The LWCF can do even more if Congress will approve full, dedicated funding for this vital program.

In addition to these programs, other critically important tools for carrying out the Action Plan include the *319 Grant Program* and the *Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds* administered by EPA in partnership with states.

The 2015 New Goal Framework of the Action Plan stated clearly that accelerated action and additional resources would be needed for successful implementation. Each of the federal programs described here can be utilized to complement and strengthen State Nutrient Strategies, along with state-level funding and private sector efforts.

The Task Force is now on a 5 year timeline to reach the 2025 Interim Target. We urge you to mobilize your agencies, pursue needed resources, and enlist public support to achieve that milestone for reducing the Gulf hypoxic zone and improving water quality in the Mississippi River Basin.

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Sincerely,

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Cc: Mississippi River Basin Congressional Delegations and Governors

