

Midwest Environmental ADVOCATES

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For Immediate Release

Gulf Dead Zone Will be Largest on Record ***EPA Plan to Mitigate is Not Enough***

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Madison, WI – Due to the widespread flooding across the Midwest, recent studies place the size of this year’s Gulf of Mexico Dead Zone at a record-setting 22,000 square kilometers (10,000 square miles) – an area roughly equivalent to the size of Massachusetts. And a recent plan released by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency doesn't go nearly as far as necessary to limit the phosphorus and nutrient run-off that causes the large area of hypoxic (oxygen-depleted) water.

Flooding in states along the Mississippi River has inundated farm fields and swept away others, likely increasing the amount of fertilizer nutrient pollution that will contaminate state waters and the Gulf of Mexico, expanding the size of the Dead Zone and exacerbating efforts to reduce it. According to the US Geological Society, pollution from agricultural fields in just nine states – specifically fertilizer and manure run-off from corn and soybean crops - is the leading cause of hypoxia in the Mississippi River Basin and the Gulf of Mexico.

Last Monday, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency released an action plan to mitigate the growing Dead Zone. However, the plan does not go far enough or require the needed reduction in nutrient pollution. According to Matt Rota, Water Resources Program Director for the Gulf Restoration Network, based in New Orleans, “Most of the 11 “action steps” in this report do not have due dates and none of them have either nitrogen and phosphorus loading reduction goals or ‘Dead Zone’ size reduction goals.”

The EPA Task Force that authored the plan ignores its own Science Advisory Board’s recommendation that they adopt a 40-percent nutrient reduction goal for the Basin. This policy is a critical first step to ensuring the Task Force can achieve the goal of reducing the size of the Dead Zone.

“EPA Task Force members acknowledge that the current voluntary, cost-share approach to solving farm pollution is failing, yet the Task Force fails to change its approach,” said Susan Heathcote, Water Program Director for the Iowa Environmental Council. “The Task Force should have adopted minimum environmental performance standards for agriculture in the nine critical Basin states and should have committed to targeting farm

conservation funds to the highest priority locations and the practices that achieve the most cost-effective nutrient reductions,” Heathcote said.

“If there are no real goals or due dates, how will progress towards successful actions be measured?” Rota asked.

Betsy Lawton, attorney at Wisconsin’s Midwest Environmental Advocates, asks the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to take a leadership role in reducing phosphorus and nitrogen loading to the Mississippi and the Gulf. “The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources can help alleviate nutrient pollution in Wisconsin, the Mississippi River, and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico, by developing nutrient limits and consistently requiring municipal and industrial sources to reduce this type of pollution,” according to Betsy Lawton.

At 7,900 square miles, an area roughly the size of New Jersey, the 2007 Dead Zone is currently the largest on record. Water from approximately two-thirds of Wisconsin’s land area drains into the Mississippi River.

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The Mississippi River Water Quality Collaborative is comprised of environmental organizations from states bordering the Mississippi River as well as regional and national groups that work on Mississippi River issues. The purpose of the Collaborative is to harness the resources and expertise of diverse organizations to reduce all types of pollution entering the river.

Midwest Environmental Advocates, Inc. (MEA) is a non-profit environmental law center working to protect the public’s right to clean air, clean water, clean government, and responsible land use. See www.midwestadvocates.org for more information.