



ENVIRONMENTAL LAW & POLICY CENTER



For Immediate Release
July 30, 2008

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Environmental Groups Seek EPA Action to Reduce Dead Zone *Illinois Largest Contributor to the Dead Zone*

Chicago, IL and Champaign, IL - Conservation groups from nine states bordering the Mississippi River, including Illinois, petitioned the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today, requesting the agency take concrete steps to reduce nitrogen and phosphorus pollution in the Gulf of Mexico and Mississippi River basin. Illinois is the largest overall polluter of the states in the Mississippi River basin, contributing about 16.8 percent of the total nitrogen and 12.9 percent of the total phosphorus that reaches the Gulf of Mexico.

"Illinois should not be proud of this No. 1 rating," said Stacy James of Prairie Rivers Network, one of the Illinois-based petitioners.

The petition to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency follows Monday's announcement of the Gulf of Mexico's second largest dead zone to date, measuring 8,000 square miles. Researchers who mapped the dead zone said it would have been substantially larger if Hurricane Dolly hadn't passed through, churning up the waters and restoring some oxygen to the zone's edges. The Gulf dead zone, an area of water where oxygen levels are too low to support marine life, is the second largest in the world. It is caused every year by nitrogen and phosphorus pollution that flows into the Gulf from the Mississippi River.

"Given the large number of Midwest rivers, lakes and streams affected by nitrogen and phosphorus pollution and the huge size of the Gulf dead zone, it is imperative that EPA stop waiting for the states to act and itself establish nitrogen and phosphorus standards for the rivers and lakes that feed the Gulf," said Albert Ettinger, Senior Staff Attorney of the Environmental Law & Policy Center.

The petitioners say the EPA has disregarded its responsibility under the federal Clean Water Act to limit pollution in the Mississippi River. The dead zone will continue to grow, they argue, unless the EPA sets numeric standards for nitrogen and phosphorus pollution and requires all states in the river basin meet those standards. The EPA is required by law to respond to the petition within a reasonable time frame.

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Without numeric pollution standards, inland states along the Mississippi River have suffered severe water quality problems. Toxic algae blooms in Illinois have closed lakes to swimming and fishing and burdened water suppliers with increased treatment costs. These blooms have killed livestock, pets and, tragically, a teenager in Wisconsin in 2002. In Illinois, water from Lake Decatur must be treated to remove nitrate at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. Currently, over 1,700 river miles in Illinois are degraded by nitrogen and phosphorus pollution. Fish kills have also been a frequent problem and damages to drinking water supplies have cost major metropolitan areas like St. Paul and Des Moines millions of dollars. Drinking water supplies in Iowa, Missouri and Tennessee have been found to have high levels of trihalomethanes, a carcinogen produced by nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus during water treatment processes.

The National Academy of Sciences agreed that the EPA had shown little leadership in a report earlier this year, calling the Mississippi River an “orphan.” The report concluded that, “the EPA has failed to use its mandatory and discretionary authorities under the Clean Water Act to provide adequate interstate coordination and oversight of state water quality activities along the Mississippi River.”

The EPA called on states in 1998 to adopt specific limits on nitrogen and phosphorus pollution, threatening to enact its own limits if states had not complied by 2003. Every state along the Mississippi has thumbed its nose at that and other deadlines set by EPA, but so far, the federal government has not stepped in to supply the urgently needed protections. As a result, inland water quality problems have multiplied and the dead zone has continued to grow.

The academy of sciences report confirmed the importance of numeric standards for nitrogen and phosphorus, stating that without them, “there is little prospect of significantly reducing or eliminating [the dead zone] in the northern Gulf of Mexico.”

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The Environmental Law and Policy Center (ELPC) is the Midwest's leading environmental legal advocacy and eco-innovation organization. For more information go to www.elpc.org.

Prairie Rivers Network is Illinois' statewide river conservation organization. We work to protect water quality and river habitats, helping to make our communities better places to live. Online at www.prairierivers.org.