



ENVIRONMENTAL LAW & POLICY CENTER

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USGS Identifies Chicago and Illinois as Top Gulf ‘Dead Zone’ Pollution Sources

For the first time, the U.S. Geological Survey has identified the top 150 polluting watersheds in the Mississippi River Basin that cause the “Dead Zone” in the Gulf of Mexico. Nitrogen and phosphorus pollution are the main causes of the dead zone, an 8,000 square mile area in the Gulf where low oxygen levels are so low that fish and other marine life suffocate.

Illinois generally and Chicago in particular are identified as the biggest sources of the nitrogen and phosphorus pollution killing the Gulf. Based on the USGS report released today, members of the Mississippi River Water Quality Collaborative urge the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and state policy makers to use the report to solve water pollution problems both within the states and downstream in the Gulf.

The USGS identifies and ranks watersheds in the Basin by how much pollution from them gets to the Gulf and contributes to the Dead Zone. The watershed containing Chicago is the top contributor of nitrogen and phosphorus pollution, which reaches the Gulf via the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. “We’ve been working with Chicago-area sewage treatment plants to reduce their nutrient pollution – this report justifies the importance of addressing this form of pollution, not just for Illinois waters, but because of the serious problems it causes as far away as the Gulf of Mexico,” said Glynnis Collins, *Executive Director of Prairie Rivers Network*, one of the Collaborative partner organizations.

“Unlike Milwaukee and many other cities, the Chicago Metropolitan Water Reclamation District does not treat its discharge to remove phosphorus and, like all but a few Illinois dischargers, does nothing to address nitrogen pollution; this cannot go on,” said Albert Ettinger, *Senior Staff Attorney at the Environmental Law & Policy Center*.

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In addition to the Chicago watershed, many of the other top 150 watersheds fall within Illinois but are located in areas that contain extensive soybean and corn fields. Runoff during rainstorms and field tile drainage transport fertilizers and animal waste into Illinois rivers and lakes. When phosphorus and nitrogen pollution become especially severe, algal blooms and fish kills can occur in local waters. Evidence is mounting that the mandated rush to plant corn – one of the most fertilizer intensive crops – for ethanol exacerbates water pollution problems within the states and in the Gulf.

“Currently, federal Farm Bill conservation dollars are not targeted to where the pollution is generated. This new report should help states focus their pollution reduction efforts in the top ranked watersheds and on the most cost-effective practices,” said Michelle Perez, *Senior Agriculture Analyst for the Environmental Working Group*. “A targeted approach to farm conservation programs will help demonstrate to taxpayers that states are trying to use their resources wisely and get the biggest bang for the buck.”

“This report demonstrates that pollution doesn’t respect state boundaries,” said *Matt Rota, Water Resources Program Director for the Gulf Restoration Network*. “Many of the top-polluting river and stream basins occupy multiple states. Downstream states like Louisiana and Mississippi are counting on a multi-state effort to address the Dead Zone. This study will hopefully help states and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to increase and target farm conservation funding to help reduce the Dead Zone, which is a major national environmental problem.”

Nine states contribute over 70 percent of the dead zone-causing nitrogen and phosphorus pollutants: Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Missouri, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, and Mississippi.

The USGS report, “Incorporating Uncertainty into the Ranking of SPARROW Model Nutrient Yields from the Mississippi/Atchafalaya River Basin Watersheds” is available online at http://water.usgs.gov/nawqa/sparrow/nutrient_yields/index.html.

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The Mississippi River Water Quality Collaborative is a partnership of environmental organizations and legal centers from states bordering the Mississippi River as well as regional and national groups working on issues affecting the Mississippi River and its tributaries. The Collaborative harnesses the resources and expertise of its diverse organizations to comprehensively reduce pollution entering the Mississippi River as well as the Gulf of Mexico.

The Environmental Law & Policy Center is a Chicago-based environmental and economic development advocacy organization. For more information, visit www.ELPC.org.