

Environmental groups seek fix for Gulf dead zone

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HOUMA — Farmland runoff is creating an “environmental disaster” in the Gulf of Mexico, and state and federal agencies should strengthen agricultural-pollution regulations to rectify that, environmental groups say.

The Environmental Law and Policy Center and the Mississippi River Collaborative released a joint report this week called “Cultivating Clean Water.” The report examines the effectiveness of state regulatory programs that control agricultural pollution and recommends policies the groups say will result in cleaner water.

The dead zone, an annual phenomenon in which oxygen is sucked from a swath of Gulf waters, is blamed on fertilizer and other farming-related chemicals that find their way into the Mississippi River. The runoff drains into the Gulf of Mexico where, once combined with warm water and summer temperatures, it creates an area of low-to-no-oxygen incapable of sustaining plant and marine life. Creatures are forced to flee the dead zone or die.

“We live at the mouth of the Mississippi and Atchafalaya rivers, so we’re getting pollution from 42 percent of the nation flowing past us,” said Matt Rota, water-resources director with the Gulf Restoration Network.

The report focuses on nitrogen and phosphorus pollution because the Environmental Protection Agency considers those the most harmful. The two also trigger massive algal blooms in the Gulf. Those blooms eventually die, sucking oxygen from the water as they decompose.

“Louisiana could do a better job of making an outcry, saying that we have this major environmental disaster on our hands,” Rota said.

The report points out the country has a fragmented and poorly implemented state-based agricultural-pollution regulations. Currently, most programs attempting to curb runoff are voluntary. Farmers typically get an incentive if they take part, but participation isn’t mandated.

Environmental officials said targeted, money-backed programs could play an important role in reducing water pollution.

“It is clear that voluntary programs alone will not get the job done and funding for voluntary programs continues to fall under the budget knife,” said Craig Cox, of the Environmental Working Group.

The report examines existing state programs and suggests five commonsense practices:

- n Vegetative buffers between farmland and water.
- n Buffers between fertilizer and manure applications and waterways.



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- n Restrictions on winter applications of manure.

- n Keeping livestock out of water bodies.

- n Restrictions on applying fertilizer in fall.

The report says several states have regulations to control agricultural pollution, though all fall short on enforcement and monitoring due to small budgets, limited staff and political resistance.

“We need to make cleaning up these watersheds a priority,” Rota said.

Whitney Broussard, a researcher at The University of Louisiana at Lafayette, said the solution is a multi-agency and multi-state cooperation.

“A watershed problem, like the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, requires a watershed approach, and watersheds pay no attention to political lines,” Broussard said.

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