**DEAD ZONE 2014 PREDICTED TO EQUAL SIZE OF CONNECTICUT**

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The Gulf of Mexico Dead Zone will be about the size of Connecticut, but that’s normal, researchers announced this week. The massive, oxygen-deprived area that forms every summer in the Gulf of Mexico off Louisiana’s coast is expected to measure between 4,600 and 5,700 square miles, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association.

That’s about average when compared with Dead Zones measured since the late 1990s, but as always, it’s expected to have a big impact on the marine ecosystem, commercial interests and others, NOAA says.

The Dead Zone is caused by pollution from fertilizer and wastewater that empties down the Mississippi River into the Gulf during every spring runoff season. Known in scientific terms as a hypoxic area, the pollution deprives the water of oxygen that’s necessary for life to survive, causing marine species to suffocate and die.

This year, experts estimate a total of 101,000 metric tons of nitrate flowed down the Mississippi River.

Researchers, including a team from LSU, model the Dead Zone in June. Teams then measure the oxygen levels in the Gulf, then release the official size of the Dead Zone.

In response to the staggering pollution numbers, a Dead Zone task force was formed more than a decade ago. Made up of federal and state agencies, the group completed two action plans and set a goal of reducing the Dead Zone size to 2,000 square miles by 2015. In a statement, Gulf Restoration Network Senior Policy Director Matt Rota called this year’s projected size, "sad."

"In order to start inching towards the Task Force’s goal, we can’t keep doing the same things and expect different results," he said. "Each of the Mississippi River states must prioritize the reduction of nitrogen and phosphorus pollution that flows off of agricultural fields and urban areas, as well as out of sewage treatment plants and industrial complexes."