



Fall 2020

## Virtual Hypoxia Task Force Meeting Accomplishments and Next Steps

The [Mississippi River/Gulf of Mexico Watershed Nutrient Task Force \(Hypoxia Task Force, HTF\)](#) is a partnership of 12 states, five federal agencies, and a tribal representative who work collaboratively to reduce the hypoxic zone in the northern Gulf of Mexico and to improve water quality throughout the Mississippi and Atchafalaya River Basin (MARB). The [HTF goal](#), subject to the availability of resources, is to reduce the 5-year average size of the hypoxic zone in the northern Gulf of Mexico to less than 5,000 square kilometers by 2035, with an interim target of reducing nitrogen and phosphorus loads delivered to the Gulf by 20 percent by 2025. The HTF met virtually on September 30 and October 1, 2020 to hold a public meeting and two executive sessions; [public](#) meeting materials can be found here. This document summarizes the main outcomes of the meetings.

### Summary of HTF Workgroup Activities

As an outcome of the February 2020 HTF meeting in Washington, DC, seven workgroups were established as an action-oriented response to a 2019 state members' letter to the [Water Subcabinet](#), which included recommendations for enhancing collaboration to reduce excess nutrients in the MARB. These workgroups and three other long-standing workgroups reported on their charges, progress, and activity since the February meeting; these actions were summarized during the public meeting. The charge for each workgroup is listed below.

- **Research Needs:** Identify key research needs that effectively support state implementation of nutrient reduction strategies.
- **Water Quality Trends:** Evaluate new metrics to complement current metrics for evaluating water quality trends in the basin.
- **Water Quality Monitoring:** Evaluate funding needs to support existing and potential new monitoring in the MARB, particularly to track loads and trends in large rivers to determine if states are meeting nutrient reduction goals and provide data that states can use to tailor implementation of their nutrient management strategies.
- **Funding:** Explore available programs and synergy with federal funding sources (Farm Bill, CWA, FEMA, WRDA, etc.) with a focus on near-term increases in nutrient reduction practice adoption, versus large program or policy changes, and identify potential long-term actions.
- **Ecosystems/Social Metrics:** Identify potential metrics that will help illuminate ecosystem changes/success due to implementation of nutrient reduction strategies in the MARB.
- **Adoption of Innovative BMPs:** Explore opportunities for states to use federal funds to implement innovative BMPs.
- **Communications:** Explore opportunities to enhance public awareness of HTF accomplishments and promote and support actions that reduce nutrient inputs and improve water quality.

- **Environmental Mitigation for Restoration Projects:** Further develop examples in individual states where mitigation challenges are causing impacts to projects.
- **Nonpoint Source Metrics:** Focus on strategies, challenges and opportunities for documenting and analyzing data related to nonpoint source nutrient reductions; produce periodic progress reports.
- **Point Source Metrics:** Focus on tracking progress in reducing nutrient loads from point sources in the Mississippi River Basin; produce periodic progress reports.

During the public meeting, Anna Wildeman of EPA presented a summary of these workgroup activities and next steps.

## State Progress

The HTF and the public heard from Minnesota, Illinois, Louisiana, and Iowa on their work and ideas regarding tracking conservation implementation, reporting to the public, and showing progress. They reported on the following:

- **Minnesota: Five-year Nutrient Reduction Strategy Report**
  - Minnesota reported on tracking progress in this MARB headwaters state, and highlighted outcomes from their Nutrient Reduction Strategy 5-year Progress Report. There have been more than 30 programs advanced since 2014 in Minnesota; progress was outlined on large geographic-scale programs, watershed approaches, BMP adoption, and decreasing 10-year concentrations of phosphorous. Minnesota has quantified nutrient load reductions achieved to date and additional actions needed to meet its HTF goals.
- **Illinois: Illinois Nutrient Research and Education Council (NREC) Report**
  - Illinois summarized the mission and progress of the NREC, which was created in 2012 to pursue nutrient research and education programs. This 13-member council ensures the adoption and implementation of practices that optimize nutrient use efficiency, ensure soil fertility, and address environmental concerns regarding fertilizer. NREC and Illinois' Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy (NLRS) work in parallel with one another: NREC evaluates removal rates for BMPs already in the strategy, provides peer-reviewed research for BMPs not yet included in the strategy, and funds a biannual survey by USDA's National Agriculture Statistical Service on NLRS awareness and adoption.
- **Louisiana: Nutrient Reduction and Management Strategy**
  - Louisiana summarized their state Nutrient Reduction and Management Strategy, along with the Governor's Second Term Coastal Priorities. Their presentation highlighted projects funded through their recent Hypoxia Task Force grant, surface water ambient and coastal water quality monitoring programs, long-term ambient water quality nutrient trends, and the status of the state's water quality trading program.
- **Iowa: Advancing Water Quality Wetland Implementation**
  - Iowa provided an overview of progress toward improving state water quality by increasing the adoption of strategically located wetlands that are designed to remove nitrate from tile-drainage water from cropland area. Significant BMP mapping, along with an updated baseline assessment, has led to progress on phosphorus losses from cropland. An overview was provided on funding options for projects, as well as typical timeframes.

## Federal Agency Updates

### EPA

Across the MARB, HTF states have worked with federal agencies and partners on many successful projects and programs to reduce nutrient loads in order to improve water quality in the MARB and reduce the size of the Gulf hypoxic zone. EPA announced the availability of a new Story Map of state efforts on EPA's HTF Website. [View the state story map here.](#)

EPA also provided information on opportunities for states to use traditional EPA funding (e.g., [Clean Water Act Section 319 grants and State Revolving Funds](#)) to support market-based programs that help further reduce excess nutrients in surface water, including the use of Section 319 funds to purchase verified water quality credits. EPA Assistant Administrator David Ross sent the presentations and a related cover memo to state and tribal environmental directors nationwide to ensure all interested states and tribes can benefit from these opportunities to expand participation in water quality markets that help drive surface water quality improvements.

### USDA

USDA announced that it has named 379 priority watersheds to help agricultural producers improve surface water quality across the country. Producers in these targeted watersheds will receive focused financial and technical resources through USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) successful landscape-level water-quality efforts—the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI) and National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI).

### NOAA

NOAA presented an update on enhancements to its ongoing risk runoff prediction tool that can help states work with farmers to reduce nutrient losses and a new related collaborative effort with the USDA Agricultural Research Service. NOAA also presented the results of the hypoxia monitoring cruise and retrospective analysis and on a newly funded project focused on emerging technologies for hypoxia monitoring.

### USGS

USGS provided an update on new tools and websites that bring increased data and spatial resolution to efforts that reduce excess nutrients in surface water.

### USACE

The Army Corps provided an overview of their civil works mission, and provided an update on the Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee as well as programs in support of states. One featured program was work on the Lower Mississippi River Batture Reforestation Project.

## Partner Updates

Ted Kratschmer of the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center provided an update on the Center's collaboration with the HTF on compiling and analyzing large datasets on water quality trends from multiple water quality monitoring stations in the Basin and developing visualization tools to make these data available to the public on a user-friendly dashboard. Dr. Jeff Seale of Bayer provided an update on the Bayer Carbon Initiative, which makes payments to farmers for adopting practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, including practices like conservation tillage and cover cropping that can have water quality co-benefits.

## Public Comments, Wrap-Up/Next Steps

The HTF heard comments from the public. The HTF Co-chairs thanked the Task Force members for their engagement, recognized state members for their efforts to implement their nutrient strategies, and thanked federal agencies for supporting the states' efforts. The Co-Chairs offered support to all the workgroups as they continue to make progress on their workplans and prepare to report out to the Task Force at the next HTF meeting.