



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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**SECRETARY BROWN ANNOUNCES \$15 MILLION IN
DISASTER ASSISTANCE FOR GULF OF MEXICO FISHERIES**

The Commerce Department is awarding \$15 million in relief assistance to commercial fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico who have sustained heavy uninsured losses due to ecosystem changes resulting from major flooding.

Commerce Secretary Ronald H. Brown will use his legislative authority to provide relief funds to businesses dependent on Gulf fisheries that have suffered severe economic losses. The funds, issued through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Office of Sustainable Development, are designated for programs that address both fishery resource and human factors.

"The Clinton administration has consistently demonstrated its commitment to the sustainable development of commercial fisheries," Brown said. "Today's disaster assistance package also demonstrates our understanding that healthy stocks are a source of livelihood and a way of life in fishing communities around the country, and around the world. The threat to these fisheries is a threat to these communities."

"We have already taken serious management actions in the Gulf to address the concerns both of the fishing families and about the resource, but we must do more," said NOAA Administrator D. James Baker. "By working with local and state officials as well as the congressional delegation, I am hopeful we can design a program to effectively address these concerns."

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The problems facing the fisheries in the Gulf stem from the Mississippi floods over the past few years that resulted in large deposits of debris in the Gulf of Mexico, creating underwater obstructions that negatively impact commercial fishing operations. In addition, large amounts of fresh water runoff from the flooded Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers into Gulf waters changed the nature of the ecosystem and created a "dead zone."

The dead zone refers to the extensive and severe areas of low oxygen (hypoxic) conditions in which finfish, shrimp, and many other forms of marine life cannot survive. Current research estimates that the dead zone now covers approximately 18,200 square km in the Gulf, the largest such zone measured in the past ten years.

Studies found extensive areas where scientists were unable to document any living organisms. The effect of persisting, extensive areas of low oxygen on bottom dwelling fishery resources are obvious since little more than bacteria may survive there.

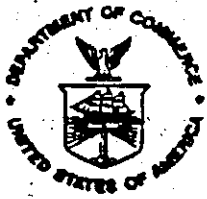
Over the next few weeks, NOAA's Office of Sustainable Development will work to bring together national, state and local officials to discuss the best possible solution to the problems facing the Gulf fisheries.

The \$15 million for the Gulf states is part of a larger \$53 million disaster assistance program initiated by Secretary Brown in response to the national crisis in fisheries in the Northeast, Northwest and Gulf states.

"We intend to work very closely with all interested parties in the Gulf states to ensure that appropriate remedies are found," said Brown.

Under section 308(d) of the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act, commercial fishermen who have suffered uninsured losses will be eligible for financial assistance under programs to be developed in cooperation with their state government agencies.

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**SECRETARY BROWN ANNOUNCES \$53 MILLION IN DISASTER
ASSISTANCE FOR NORTHEAST, NORTHWEST AND GULF FISHERIES**

The Commerce Department will provide \$53 million in disaster assistance to help commercial fishermen and small fishery-dependent businesses following the collapse of fishery resources in the Northeast, Northwest and Gulf states.

Commerce Secretary Ronald H. Brown will use his legislative authority to provide the relief funds, extending to the Northeast and Gulf of Mexico a disaster relief program initiated last year in the Pacific Northwest. Last year's program was in response to the unprecedented low numbers of Pacific salmon stocks in the region.

"The Clinton administration has consistently demonstrated its commitment to the sustainable development of commercial fisheries," Brown said. "Today's disaster assistance package also demonstrates our understanding that healthy stocks are a source of livelihood and a way of life in fishing communities around the country, and around the world. The threat to these fisheries is a threat to these communities."

The funds, issued through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Office of Sustainable Development, are designated for programs that address both fishery resource and human factors.

"We have already taken serious management actions in all three regions to address the concerns of the resource and the fishing families, but we must do more," said NOAA Administrator D. James Baker. "Extraordinary measures are called for, both in how we manage these valuable resources and in how we respond to needs of our fishing families."

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In the Northeast, the groundfish stocks that had long sustained a healthy commercial fishery have disappeared. The assistance program includes \$25 million for the implementation of a vessel/permit buyout program that retires fishing vessels and buys back existing permits.

In the Northwest \$13 million in emergency assistance will be released to the states of Washington, Oregon and California as a result of the continuing disaster due to the effects of El Niño and years of drought on the salmon fisheries. These funds will augment the three-state Northwest Emergency Assistance Plan announced last year, which includes a vessel/permit buyout program and habitat restoration and data collection jobs program.

In the Gulf of Mexico, the commercial fishing industry will receive \$15 million in emergency assistance to compensate for equipment lost or damaged by uncharted seabed obstructions caused by major flooding over the past two years and other natural forces.

All of these situations involve serious harm to fishery resources, which has caused substantial loss to small fishing businesses and dependent coastal communities. In all three situations, adverse environmental conditions have aggravated already depleted fisheries resources.

"We intend to work very closely with all interested parties in the three regions to ensure that appropriate remedies are applied to the different circumstances," said Brown.

Under section 308(d) of the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act, commercial fishermen who have suffered uninsured losses will be eligible for financial assistance under programs to be developed in cooperation with their state government agencies.

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