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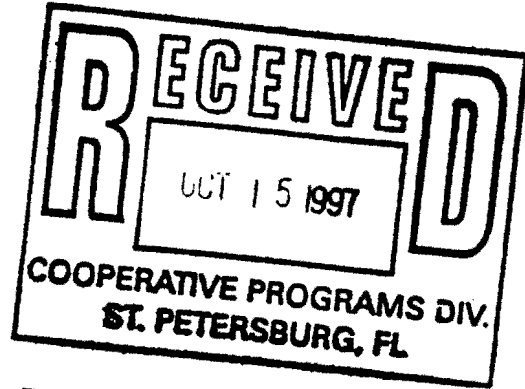


GULF STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION

P.O. Box 726, Ocean Springs, MS 39566-0726
(601) 875-5912 (FAX) 875-6604

October 10, 1997

Mr. Terry Garcia
Acting Assistant Secretary for Oceans
and Atmosphere
NOAA/DOC
Room 5804
14th and Constitution NW
Washington, D.C. 20230



Dear Mr. Garcia:

I am writing on behalf of the five states in the Gulf of Mexico region regarding the emergency appropriations bill authorized under section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. As you know, Congress has appropriated \$3,500,000 to our region for impacts resulting from the opening of the Bonnet Carré Spillway in Louisiana this past spring and the gulf-wide red tide event which occurred throughout the fall of 1996 and the winter of 1997 in all five Gulf States. I am making a request for the declaration of disaster and the release of these funds to the Gulf Coast region at this time.

The impact of the Bonnet Carré Spillway opening from March 17 to April 17 was significant due to the fact that it is the greatest single release of freshwater into the Lake Pontchartrain Basin and Mississippi Sound since 1983. The maximum flow reached an estimated 240,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) and is the second highest discharge rate in the history of the Bonnet Carré Spillway. The decision to open the spillway was made in an effort to protect human life and property from devastating floods. In addition, the spillway was accidentally reopened a few weeks later due to high winds causing a floodgate release. This further exacerbated the situation as water continued to be released for another 10 days.

The result was a short-term (less than three months) environmental change to the inshore areas of Louisiana eastward into Mississippi during a time in which the spawning and recruitment of many estuarine organisms occur. The pulse of freshwater moving through the area displaced finfish, shrimp, and crabs and consequently displaced the fishers with them. Those who were impacted suffered because during that time they had no cash flow due to a lack of harvest. Most organisms returned to the area eventually but not in the same numbers as before. In addition to displacing adult and subadults of important species, the high discharges depressed both salinities and temperatures

-Alabama-

-Florida-

-Louisiana-

-Mississippi-

-Texas-

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which may have reduced the survival of larval fishes and crustaceans that were recruiting into the impact area. The biological impacts on future year classes within the gulf fisheries resulting from the timing of these events will not be evident for several years. Subsequent to the opening of the Bonnet Carré Spillway, a public health advisory related to harmful algal blooms was issued for Lake Pontchartrain and in the gulf, coast-wide, disrupting markets for fisheries' products.

In addition to the Bonnet Carré Spillway opening, the red tide that hit the Northern Gulf of Mexico in the fall and winter of 1996 resulted in two to five months with no shellfish harvest prior to the Bonnet Carré Spillway opening. Although it has been argued that the red tide did not kill oysters in the Gulf of Mexico, it did kill a significant number of finfish. The best estimates from Texas indicate that 3 to 4 million finfish were killed in Texas waters due to the red tide in 1996. Of these 3 to 4 million, there were 12,000 to 14,000 dead adult red drum. Other important species included flounder, black drum, and Atlantic croaker. Additional fish kills were documented in each of the other Gulf States as well. Deaths were not limited to fish however, marine mammals and birds also suffered mortalities from the red tide in 1996 and 1997.

In addition to the direct loss of finfish, the Gulf Coast region experienced a significant loss of revenue due to the red tide. Oyster harvesting was stopped completely in the affected areas which included waters in all five states. Closures of reefs ran from September to January in Texas, and from November through December and January for Alabama and Mississippi while parts of Louisiana were closed from mid-November until early April. This time period represents the peak harvesting and the peak price season for oysters in the northern Gulf of Mexico. In addition to the lack of an oyster harvest, our region has also been negatively impacted by the media fallout of the red tide. The general perception among seafood consumers in the United States since these unprecedented events is that the Gulf of Mexico fisheries are somehow tainted and should be avoided. This unmeasurable impact could further complicate the situation for years to come as the region must recover from the market disruption and untrue and inaccurate public perceptions even though the quality of the seafood coming out the Gulf Coast region is higher than ever because of the increased awareness and concern for public health. Beyond the economic impacts of the red tide on our fisheries, the impacts on tourism on the Gulf Coast are negative and unquantifiable. The elderly were required to stay away from the beaches due to the presence of red tide and the associated health risks especially among those with weakened respiratory systems creating a justifiable fear and loss of revenue from many of the "snowbirds" that contribute to the winter economy on the Gulf Coast.

With all of this in mind, we would like to petition you to consider the following. The series of events in the Gulf Coast region are truly unique situations calling for further investigation. The opening of the Bonnet Carré Spillway was a prevention measure to spare lives and countless losses to property due to the uncharacteristically wet spring the region experienced. This resulted in economic hardship and a loss in the form of mortality on our fisheries whose full impact may not be evident for several years. In addition, the presence of red tide on the coasts of Louisiana,

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Mississippi, and Alabama had never been reported in recorded history, and Texas has only documented six red tides since 1844. The occurrence of red tide simultaneously along all five coasts was, without question, a first time phenomenon. These unprecedented natural events clearly were disastrous to the Gulf Coast region but lacked the same physical damage that one would expect from a hurricane or other "natural disaster."

The response from the Gulf Coast region has resulted in a concerted effort by all five states to address the concerns of the public and to increase awareness across the gulf with regard to the effects of harmful algal blooms. As much of the country deals with toxic algae scares, the gulf still suffers from the perception problem created by the red tide. We are, therefore, in a unique situation in the Gulf Coast region. While red tides are natural events and unavoidable, we must focus our efforts on education of our industry in a continuing effort to heighten awareness of the potential risks associated with harmful algal blooms and to improve our ability to predict and assess similar blooms in the future before they lead to further problems.

Our plan for the emergency appropriations to the Gulf Coast region is multifaceted and will include, but not be limited to several projects. First, we plan to initiate a coordinated, multi state program of education and monitoring. Taking an offensive position will better prepare the states for future closings of both beaches and oyster reefs and will speed the clean up and recovery process once the situation has ended. Included under the improved monitoring measures is flight time for spotting of blooms by air and handheld GPS units for enhanced site location, delineation, and verification by boat. Second, Florida has indicated it will take the lead on improving the testing processes for red tide toxins which currently involve laboratory or intensive mouse bioassays to determine the reopening criteria for shellfish harvest. These are the only techniques presently accepted by the Food and Drug Administration even though recent research has found new techniques that are faster, boast improved sensitivity, and can offer screening in the field. As these new techniques are approved, they will be made available to all the Gulf States. In addition, some states have indicated an interest in relaying oysters into other areas. The Gulf States have also indicated an interest in education campaigns directed at both the uninformed consumers and the seafood producers in the Gulf Coast region. This campaign will be a gulf-wide effort to change the negative perception which the red tide and similar harmful algal blooms have created throughout the country and may include advertising in national markets, videos, Internet web sites, and information hotlines. Some states are interested in laboratory and possible field research into the dissipation or elimination of red tide, including the use of clay to precipitate *Gymnodinium breve* red tide out of the water column, a technique which has been used with some success by the Japanese on Pacific algal blooms.

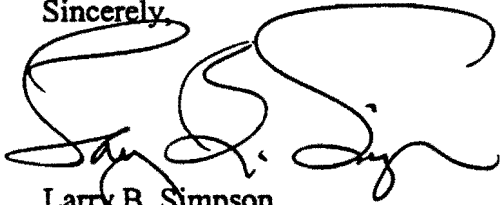
Considering the extent of impact each state has suffered due to the disastrous events of 1996 and 1997, we propose a fair and equitable breakdown of the appropriated funds. Because of limited impact from the Bonnet Carré Spillway opening to Texas and Alabama, we would request .45 million dollars go to each of those states for damages related to the red tide event. Louisiana and Mississippi were directly impacted by both the opening of the spillway and the red tide events, and

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we would request them to receive 1.3 and .5 million dollars, respectively. Finally, we would request that Florida, which continues to suffer from red tide, be the recipient of .8 million dollars.

I have attached several appendices from the states which document and are specific to their actions on these issues for your review and information. Please contact me if I can be of any additional help with this request. I look forward to a favorable response in the near future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Larry B. Simpson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Larry B. Simpson
Executive Director

\cby

Enclosures

cc: GSMFC Commissioners & Proxies
Gulf Congressional Delegation
Jack Dunnigan
Randy Fisher
John Bullard
Rolland Schmitten
Andy Kemmerer
Ellie Roche
Bruce Morehead