

Meeting Summary
***Seventh Meeting of the Mississippi River/Gulf of Mexico
Watershed Nutrient Task Force***

October 11, 2000
Baton Rouge Marriott
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Charles (Chuck) Fox, Assistant Administrator for Water at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) chaired the seventh Task Force meeting. The primary objective was to discuss the comments received from the public on the draft *Action Plan for Reducing, Mitigating, and Controlling Hypoxia in the Northern Gulf of Mexico* (Action Plan), and the goals to be incorporated into the final Action Plan.

Opening Remarks

After thanking everyone for their participation, Chuck Fox opened the meeting and announced a change in the meeting schedule, to allow for public comment at the start of the meeting, instead of near its end. Following Mr. Fox's comments, Linda Korn Levy, sitting in for Dale Givens of the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, offered a few opening remarks, and all Task Force members introduced themselves to the public.

Public Comment Discussion

Mr. Fox opened up the meeting to public comment. Several themes emerged as the participants expressed their concerns.

Many participants felt education and incentives rather than numeric goals were the key to producing agricultural improvements. Gayl Hopkins and Gary Edwards (Iowa Corn Growers Association), Roy Bardole (Iowa Soybean Association), and Nancy Erickson (Illinois Farm Bureau) noted the great strides being made through education and incentive programs in their states and expressed their belief that education is the key to reducing nitrogen in the Gulf. In addition, Nancy Erickson, Gayl Hopkins, David Mulla (University of Minnesota), and David Machucek (Iowa Farm Bureau) did not want numeric goals set for nitrogen reduction. They feel setting numeric goals for reduction is premature and encouraged the Task Force to focus on cost/benefits, available science, and education instead. Chris Dorsett (Gulf Restoration Network), however, expressed his support for a numeric goal.

A second major concern was the involvement of the farmers at the local level and the need for a cost-share program to support farmers in the implementation of nitrogen reducing practices. Doug Daigle (Mississippi River Basin Alliance), Gary Edwards, and David Machucek expressed the need for more stakeholder involvement. Working with farmers at the local level could greatly increase the support for the program, which would lead to more farmers implementing nitrogen reducing practices. Gayl Hopkins and Susan Heathcote (Iowa Environmental Council) addressed the need for a cost-share program to support farmers who wish to implement nitrogen reducing practices. Gary Edwards also mentioned the need for a cost-share program, specifically to fund the use of global positioning systems and geographic information technology which he feels will significantly help farmers reduce nitrogen loss from their fields.

Roy Bardole, Cliff Snyder (Potash & Phosphate Institute), Nancy Erickson, and David Mulla encouraged the Task Force to look beyond nitrogen management as they address the hypoxia problem. Mulla expressed the need to understand the entire nitrogen cycle, while Snyder was more concerned with reducing nitrogen loss at the edge of fields. Participants worried other factors contributing to hypoxia

could be overlooked if too much emphasis is placed on nitrogen reduction. Terry Francl (American Farm Bureau Federation) shared his concern that the Action Plan overestimates the miles of streams and rivers impacted by agriculture.

Many participants expressed their deep concern for the land. Roy Bardole and John Hoffman (Iowa Soybean Association) mentioned their desire to preserve the land and their way of life as farmers. Roy Bardole, Susan Heathcote, and Brian Sievers (farmer) shared some steps already taken by farmers to help reduce the impact of agriculture on water quality including buffer strips, wetlands mitigation banking, reduction of nitrogen rates, and the Farm*A*Syst program. Jerry Huffman (Jerry Huffman, Inc.) advocates nitrification inhibitors and encouraged the Task Force to include them as possible solutions to nitrogen over enrichment.

Other concerns centered around the importance of considering cost/benefit analysis information, adding non-government parties to the Task Force, nutrients contributing to growing jelly fish populations that adversely effect Gulf ecosystems, and the impending arrival of the new Farm Bill and the effect it will have on farmers.

Task Force Discussion

Chuck Fox closed the public discussion session by thanking all the participants and asked for comments by the Task Force. The discussion included the legal ramifications of changing the composition of the Task Force. Mr. Fox suggested looking into the issue of including representatives from land grant universities and agricultural and environmental interests. Mr. Fox also commented that the Task Force tries only to report the facts and keep the public informed as to its progress toward meeting the Congressionally mandated goal of developing an Action Plan.

Summary of Comments Received on the Draft Action Plan

Bob Wayland (EPA/Office of Wetlands, Oceans, and Watersheds) provided an overview of the comments received from 11 states covering 18 different state agencies. A total of 154 individuals signed the nearly 100 letters received. Comments addressed goals, the implementation framework, funding, the consequences of not achieving the numeric goal set forth, and the cost-benefit analysis.

Many commenters felt the dates outlined in the Action Plan were too ambitious and suggested that more time be provided to accomplish each task. Overall there was more support for the goal of meeting a particular environmental condition rather than reaching a quantitative goal. Most commenters agreed that the Action Plan did not place enough emphasis on the voluntary nature of the solutions highlighted in the Plan.

Task Force Discussion

Discussion of Goals

Task Force members agreed the dates in the goal and the Action Plan are too ambitious and new sources of funding are needed to carry out Action Plan goals. During a separate meeting of the Task Force members, goal 1(b) was revised to read:

By the year 2015, subject to the availability of additional resources, reduce the 5-year running average areal extent of the Gulf of Mexico hypoxia to less than 5,000 square kilometers through implementation of specific, practical, and cost effective voluntary actions by all states, tribes, and all categories of sources and removals within the Mississippi/Atchafalaya River Basin to reduce the annual discharge of nutrients into the Gulf.

Karen Studders (Minnesota Pollution Control Agency) proposed new language introducing the goals of the Action Plan:

The goals of this strategy are three-fold and based upon 5 principles:

1. Actions are voluntary, practical, and cost-effective;
2. Utilize existing programs;
3. Follow adaptive management;
4. Based on supplemental appropriations (of \$X billion per year) beginning in FY 2002; and
5. Provide measurable outcomes as outlined below in the three goals and strategies.

Adaptive Management

After a lengthy discussion of where a nitrogen reduction goal (in percent) should be included, the Task Force agreed to place it under the first bullet in the adaptive management approach to read:

Action: implementing the actions identified in this plan including developing sub-basin strategies, initiating additional monitoring and research, and pursuing a national commitment to supporting actions to reduce and mitigate the impacts of hypoxia in the Gulf. The best current science indicates that sub-basin strategies, in the aggregate, should be aimed at achieving a 30 percent reduction (from the average discharge in the 1990-1995 time frame) in nitrogen discharges to the Gulf (on a 5 year running average) to be consistent with the Goal for reducing the areal extent of hypoxia in the Gulf.

All task force members endorsed this placement of the 30 percent language.

Implementation Framework

Mr. Wayland provided an overview of the implementation actions spelled out and Charles Ledin (Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources) of the Task Force suggested extending the time frames proposed for implementing the sub-basin strategies. Glenda Humiston (U.S. Department of Agriculture/Natural Resources and Environment) asked that a new action be added to address the creation of a Budget Strategy, and Karen Studders suggested that a goal of collecting baseline data be included in the new implementation action that calls for the budget strategy. Chuck Fox then proposed that the entire section on Key Roles and Responsibilities be stricken from the Action Plan because of its redundant nature. The Task Force agreed with this suggestion.

Budget

John Wilson (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency/Office of Wetlands, Oceans, and Watersheds) provided an overview of each of the funds proposed in the draft Action Plan's funding section, as well as the comments received specifically addressing the funds. Most of the comments centered around inaccuracies in the program list and on the need to clarify that the Task Force is asking for new monies. Mr. Wilson added that it would take around \$1 billion/year for at least 5 years to implement the Action Plan.

Glenda Humiston proposed the creation of a new Implementation Action that would address the development of a budget for new and additional funds to support voluntary programs addressed in the action outline in the Plan by December 2001.

Discussion then moved to the difficulty of acquiring matching funds for cost-share programs. Charles Groat (U.S. Geological Survey) and Tom Pullen (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) suggested non-

matching funding programs be established. Chuck Fox asked the Coordination Committee to take this into account when developing the budget strategy and suggested using the Bay Delta and the Everglades as models for developing a budget strategy. He then directed EPA staff to revise their latest budget analysis, but to keep the seven categories and the overall target levels they have already developed in their draft budget analysis.

Continuation/Composition of the Task Force

Chuck Fox directed the discussion to what direction the Task Force should take in the future. Several suggestions were given to expand the role of community involvement in the process, and Mr. Fox promised to look into the possibilities under the FACA. Other members suggested that community involvement could be achieved by allowing the sub-basins to work out the details so that their strategies are best suited to their individual needs. The Task Force also briefly discussed events to take place at a proposed January meeting, and noted that budget questions would be better addressed then.

Closing Remarks

Chuck Fox closed the meeting by promising to have a revised Action Plan (and a corresponding budget document) to the Task Force within 2 to 3 weeks. After that, he hoped to send the Action Plan and to the President in late November or early December.