



November 29, 2023

Mississippi River and Gulf of Mexico Hypoxia Task Force  
Radhika Fox (Co-Chair), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency  
Mike Naig (Co-Chair), Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship

*Submitted via email to Katie Flahive at [Flahive.Katie@epa.gov](mailto:Flahive.Katie@epa.gov)*

**Re: Mississippi River Network (MRN) Comments for the 38<sup>th</sup> Public Meeting of the Gulf Hypoxia Task Force on December 6, 2023**

Dear Gulf Hypoxia Task Force Members:

We appreciate the opportunity to provide a public comment for consideration of the Gulf Hypoxia Task Force at its 38<sup>th</sup> public meeting in Fayetteville, AR. The Mississippi River Network (MRN) will also deliver public comments at the in-person meeting. We look forward to responding to the day-of presentations at that time. In this comment letter, we propose ways for the Task Force to maximize public outreach and NGO participation, provide recommendations on how to use increased federal support to realize whole basin results, urge the Task Force to lead new efforts to understand how climate change will impact our basin, and offer organizational approaches that may help the Task Force orient towards innovation.

**MRN & Our Public Engagement with the Gulf Hypoxia Task Force (GHTF)**

MRN is a coalition of nearly 70 partner organizations working together to protect our Mississippi River. The Network seeks to influence not only policies that affect the River but also people's perceptions of and connections to the River. MRN's policy program works in tandem with our public education and advocacy program called *1 Mississippi* to urge decision-makers to create federal and state policies that improve the health of the River. MRN educates both its member organizations and the public on how River-friendly policies can promote a healthier Mississippi River, and MRN amplifies opportunities to reach decision-makers and advocate for such policies.

We have encouraged our grassroots supporter base of River Citizens to reach out to you over the years to share their visions for a healthy Mississippi River. We've engaged both grassroots

and grassroots networks to encourage them to make public comments at your meetings and take advocacy actions directed at GHTF members. We recognize that the Hypoxia Task Force is the only federal and state collaborative of its kind formally tasked with and responsible for specific goals related to reducing nutrient pollution in the Mississippi River basin. For this reason, we understand the Task Force's successes as our own and its failures as opportunities for all of us to work more intently on the issues that face our Mississippi River.

We see these public meetings as important occasions for GHTF member agencies and states to advance implementation of the Action Plan for Reducing Hypoxia in the Gulf of Mexico and to inform the public about the specific steps that are being taken to achieve the Plan's goals. While these meetings are open to the public, we continue to see opportunities for better public outreach and engagement.

Last year, we asked for the Task Force to meet in the Mississippi River basin rather than in Washington, DC. We appreciate that this meeting is taking place in Fayetteville, AR in 2023. If there are ways that MRN can help inform the decision-making process around locations to hold these meetings, we are eager to assist. Our grassroots supporter base is 20,000 people strong and our nearly 70 member organizations and small businesses are in all 10 mainstem states. The Task Force's public outreach and engagement efforts may be eased by being co-located in areas with higher numbers of individuals interested in Mississippi River policy and organizations active in this space.

We also heard in 2022 that state agencies pursue public engagement and stakeholder outreach on a local and state-level for specific projects and campaigns throughout the year and outside of the HTF meeting. While this is valuable, we're curious: why are those state NGOs and other stakeholders not engaged in or present at these annual Hypoxia Task Force public meetings?

We appreciate that state agencies are engaging robustly on the ground, but the opportunity to think about the Mississippi River system **as a whole** is a powerful lens that the Task Force is uniquely positioned to provide. Yet, when the Task Force gathers we are witness to presentations on a siloed, state-by-state basis. Are there whole river conversations and discussions that take place prior to the public meeting? How and when do state agencies discuss lessons learned or models to replicate throughout the basin? We see these types of discussions as meaningful potential future agenda items for this public meeting.

As an organization that works in all 10 mainstem Mississippi River states, MRN finds it challenging to keep tabs on each state's variable and irregular nutrient loss reduction plans. The lack of uniformity may give states flexibility, but it also makes it impossible to compare progress or understand how any one state may be impacting the River system.

MRN urges the Task Force to take a coordinated, whole basin approach wherever possible, rather than relying exclusively on state plans. State plans have an important role to play, but without overarching direction, coordination, targeting, and standardization at a federal and geographic level we will continue to miss the forest for the trees.

## **How did HTF use Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) Funding? What level of federal support is needed to meet the scale of our basin wide issues?**

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) included \$12 million per year for five years (\$60 million total) for actions to support the Task Force's Action Plan. At the 2022 public meeting in DC, we heard about how this federal support was going to be used. We look forward to receiving more updates at the 2023 public meeting in Fayetteville about how BIL investments are being spent by the Task Force and how that federal funding is honoring the intentions of the Biden Administration's Justice40 initiative.

As laid out in EPA's June 2022 Guidance document, funding through BIL amounts to less than \$1 million per year per state and closer to \$750,000 per year per state in FY23 through FY25. While this funding is a step in the right direction, we can all agree that it is nowhere near the scale of dedicated investment needed to achieve HTF goals.<sup>1</sup> Based on the state presentations from 2022, this amount of funding is mostly going to existing programs or staff capacity, and it is *not* leading to significant innovation or scaling up of basinwide efforts.

What level of funding *would* the GHTF require to think outside the box about your collective work? The state and federal agencies (and the individual staff) involved in the Task Force work on much more than Mississippi River issues on a daily basis; it's one of the many topics and geographies you all work on. With significant increases in funding, MRN would recommend the GHTF pursue efforts such as:

- Dedicated staff in each state that could coordinate directly with federal agencies on Mississippi River issues
- Holistic monitoring and reporting on the health of the Mississippi River from the state and federal agency perspective
- Mississippi River specific data sets pulled from EPA's myriad of existing tools such as the Beach Act dataset<sup>2</sup>, Cyanobacteria Assessment Network mobile application, or How's My Waterway
- A dashboard for the Mississippi River states (perhaps pulled from the dataset above) that lives on the GHTF's existing website.

These ideas require funding and increasing collaboration also has a cost. MRN has a history of advocating for increased federal funding for state nutrient reduction strategies and related programs, especially where they can focus on basin wide issues and have an impact on the scale and at the speed of the issues we are facing in the Mississippi River basin. If there are specific ways we can advocate for the Task Force, we are eager to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> HTF has an Interim Target of reducing nitrogen and phosphorus loading to the Gulf by 20 percent by the year 2025, as a key step in reaching an average annual size of the Hypoxic Zone of 5,000 square kilometers by the year 2035.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. EPA manages the Beach Act dataset which currently only includes coastal and Great Lakes states; there is no Mississippi River state info despite the fact that our states experience beach closures in the summertime: <https://www.epa.gov/beaches/find-information-about-particular-us-beach>

At last year's meeting, we also expressed our interest in knowing more about how the Justice40 Initiative would factor into the Task Force's work and implementation of BIL funds. We look forward to learning more about that at the meeting in Fayetteville.

**Decreasing trends in pollution do not mean our work is done, and we need to incorporate climate change into future modeling.**

Given all of the above, we are pleased to know that the Task Force is working with the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRREC) – an MRN member organization and a voting member of MRN's Policy Committee – to analyze overall trends for the Mississippi River basin. We look forward to learning more about NGRREC's trends analysis at the Fayetteville meeting and how it will inform the Task Force's work moving forward.

As is the case with any model, the results are only as good as the data it's based on. We know data and monitoring in Mississippi River states is uneven. We need consistent monitoring and evaluation in all states. We also need better tools to understand the cumulative impacts on the entire basin. For example, could a decreasing trend in the Upper Mississippi River region still contribute to overall increase trends in the Lower River?

Lastly, in September 2023 MRN hosted Dr. Christopher J. Gobler<sup>3</sup> from Stony Brook University to present his latest research on the impacts of climate change on harmful algal blooms (HABs). Summer 2023 was the hottest summer on record by a significant margin. There is limited research to-date on the combined influence of HABs, acidification, hypoxia, and thermal stress (all symptoms of climate change) on freshwater systems and aquatic life. Studies in marine systems have already shown that increasing water temperatures are changing the nature of HABs, expanding their presence toward the poles and extending bloom seasons.<sup>4</sup> In some contexts, this research found the bloom period of HABs containing neurotoxins have been extended by as much as two months in the last 30 years. In other words, the season for HABs is now two months longer than it was in the 1980's.

Through MRN's grassroots engagement over the years, we have found that most of our supporters experience the impacts of fertilizer and runoff pollution by way of harmful algal blooms and beach closures in their state every summer. The issue of HABs also makes clear the importance of our work to the realms of public health and recreation. What role can the Task Force play in anticipating and modeling the impacts of climate change on the Mississippi River system?

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Gobler's presentation "How Climate Change is making HABs more toxic" is viewable on our 1 Mississippi program's YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/yzNGZsESsb0?si=bQnilFM6aA5O689g>

<sup>4</sup> Gobler et al. 2017, PNAS, Ocean warming since 1982 has expanded the niche of toxic algal blooms in the North Atlantic and North Pacific oceans. <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1619575114>

**Shifting the Task Force towards a Learning Organization model and away from an over-reliance on success stories**

Over the years, we have noticed that the presentations made by state agencies at HTF meetings are almost always a collection of success stories and positive readouts. Perhaps this over-reliance on success stories at the only public meeting of this body is something that contributes to the frustration from the NGO community that the GHTF is simply “not doing enough.” It is hard to reconcile the individual state successes with the overall picture of a declining River basin (even if some trends in some reaches are showing progress). As the only 12-state group considering the state of the Mississippi River, we also look to you to provide transparent updates on the whole river from the perspective of state and federal agencies.

There are numerous resources related to Learning Organizations and their characteristics, but the ones we are urging the GHTF to demonstrate more are embracing failure as an inseparable component of innovation and operating from the perspective that we are all learners. From the outside public’s perspective, the GHTF operates in a top-down, expert-knows-best manner. This makes it challenging for NGOs to know how to support the work of the GHTF or what kinds of challenges agencies are facing daily as they contemplate the overall goals of the Task Force.

The Task Force has an upcoming opportunity to reckon with a failure. The Interim Goal of reducing nitrogen and phosphorus loading to the Gulf by 20 percent by 2025 will not be met. We urge the EPA and the Task Force to use this failure as an opportunity to be transparent and communicate why this goal wasn’t met, what was learned, and how the approach will change moving forward. It cannot be used as an excuse to simply change the goal post to something different.

Thank you for receiving our comments. We look forward to being in person with you in Fayetteville next week. If you have any questions or would like additional information about any of the above, please reach out to Maisah Khan, Policy Director at the Mississippi River Network at [mkhan@1mississippi.org](mailto:mkhan@1mississippi.org).

Sincerely,



Maisah Khan  
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Mississippi River Network