



February 2020
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 River/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 in [Washington, DC on February 3-5, 2020](#) to hold a public meeting, an executive session, and an informal networking session with the public. This document summarizes the main outcomes of the public meeting.

HTF Communications

The HTF has heard that the public wants more communication from the HTF and states about their work to improve local water quality and reduce Gulf hypoxia. The states each spoke during the public meeting to provide a high-level overview of updates on key actions taken. EPA is now publishing a quarterly newsletter on behalf of the HTF to communicate the scale, efforts, and progress of nutrient management in the Mississippi River Basin and the Gulf of Mexico; [four issues of the HTF Newsletter](#) have been published to date. In addition to in-person participation in the public meeting, more than 140 people participated via webinar. The Task Force and its individual members are committed to communicating with the public about their work to improve water quality and reduce Gulf hypoxia.

USDA Update

At the meeting, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Chief Matt Lohr announced investments of over \$56 million for producers to improve water quality through Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI) and National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI). [Learn more](#) from the official news release on USDA's website.

Chief Lohr described the specific investments: (1) MRBI investments of \$17.5 million to 13 states (MRBI specifically supports the nutrient loss reduction strategies of HTF states) and (2) NWQI investments of \$38.9 million across the nation (NWQI supports identifying and addressing impaired water bodies through voluntary conservation). [Learn more](#) about specific statistics presented during his presentation. Chief Lohr also discussed the [conservation assessment ranking tool \(CART\)](#), a new technology that will replace previous conservation planning tools. [USDA's website](#) notes that CART "modernizes and streamlines NRCS' conservation planning and program delivery, reduces workload on field staff, and improves the customer experience by creating an efficient application process."

The HTF followed up with a discussion, highlighting the importance of “boots on the ground to solve the problem,” hearing the needs of people to most efficiently use USDA resources to address conservation needs, and the need to rely on and build relationships with state conservationists or state technical leads. In response to the comment about “boots on the ground,” Chief Lohr shared that USDA has an opportunity to hire 1,200 new employees to help provide additional technical support.

Water Quality Trends Workgroup

In May 2019 at the Baton Rouge meeting, the HTF discussed the challenge of documenting progress. The HTF currently tracks progress on point sources, nonpoint sources, and trends in in-stream water quality and nutrient loads near the mouth of the Mississippi River. Available data and information indicate there have been water quality improvements within the Basin, but they are not yet occurring on a scale that is reflected in the Gulf hypoxic zone. The development of a consistent approach for the HTF to track water quality trends in smaller subbasins throughout the MARB might allow additional progress to be observed and further inform strategies to effectively implement states’ nutrient reduction strategies.

As a result, the HTF formed a water quality trends workgroup with the members from eight states, the Lower Mississippi River Subbasin Committee, USGS, and EPA. The workgroup presented its recommendations to the HTF, which include the following:

- Look at trends in both concentration and load. Concentration gives a good indication of water quality at the local scale, while load provides an indication of how much is moving downstream.
- Look at both annual and spring loads and concentrations.
- Look at trends through multiple periods of time:
 - HTF Baseline (1985-1996) to 2017
 - 10 year: 2007-2017
 - 30 or 25 year: 1987-2017 or 1992-2017
- Look at multiple parameters (nitrate, total nitrogen, total phosphorus, dissolved phosphorus, orthophosphate, sediment, and turbidity).
- Use WRTDS analysis (weighted regression on time, discharge, and season) to look at trends.

Next steps for the workgroup are to collaborate with the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRECC) to identify monitoring sites in the HTF states that have the required data for trend analysis and discuss the best ways to share water quality progress with the public. The workgroup will provide an update at the next HTF meeting on its analysis of potential monitoring sites and options for displaying trend results.

Actions and Outcomes in Implementing State Nutrient Reduction Strategies

Five multistate panels, organized by themes, described important components of their strategies and results. A listing of each session and each state's presentation title is provided below. Access the presentations [here](#).

State Science Assessment

- Indiana Science Assessment, Julie Harrold, Indiana State Department of Agriculture
- Kentucky's Science Assessment: Data Driven Implementation, John Webb, Kentucky Division of Water
- Kicking off Mississippi's Science Assessment, Natalie Segrest, Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality

Goal Setting to Ensure Implementation Efforts are Targeted and Tracked by Developing Milestones/Interim Goals (State- Or Watershed-Wide)

- Arkansas Nutrient Reduction Strategy Goal Setting and Targeting, J. Ryan Benefield, Arkansas Department of Agriculture
- Ohio – Monitoring and Movement on Nutrient Reduction, John Matthews, Ohio Environmental Protection Agency

Deploying Staff to Plan, Prioritize, Engage Partners and Stakeholders in Priority Watersheds, and Manage Progress Tracking Mechanisms

- Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy Watershed Coordinators, Trevor Sample, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency
- Iowa Nutrient Strategy, Matt Lechtenberg, Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship

Assessing Progress: Develop and Deploy a System for Tracking and Reporting Progress

- Louisiana Statewide Nutrient Reduction and Management Strategy: Assessing Progress, Brian Lezina, Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority
- Minnesota's Nutrient Reduction Strategy: Tracking Progress Toward Milestones, Katrina Kessler, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency
- Tennessee's Nutrient Framework Implementation, John McClurkan, Tennessee Department of Agriculture

Market-Based Approaches

- Missouri Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy, Kurt Boeckmann, Missouri Department of Natural Resources
- Water Quality Trading: A Market-Based Approach in Wisconsin, Jim Zellmer, Department of Natural Resources

Public Comments, Wrap Up/Next Steps and Networking Session

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 encouraged all members to continue to engage partners and stakeholders and pursue innovative approaches to finance and scale up efforts to improve local water quality and reduce Gulf hypoxia. Following formal close of the public meeting, Task Force members interacted with members of the public in an informal networking session.