

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

June 12, 2019

The Honorable Wilbur Ross
Secretary of Commerce
U.S. Department of Commerce
14th and Constitution Avenue N.W.
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Ross:

We are writing in support of Governor Phil Bryant's request that you begin implementing a federal fisheries disaster declaration, as outlined by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

Tough decisions have to be made when dealing with federal flood control management. Earlier this year, the Bonnet Carré Spillway was opened for 43 days, from February 27th to April 11th. It was opened again less than a month later on May 10, and it remains open today. In its 88-year history, the spillway had never before been opened twice in the same year. This represents an unprecedented challenge to our state's coastal waters.

Freshwater from the spillway flows into the Mississippi Sound, disrupting the ecosystem and causing substantial loss of marine life. The Institute for Marine Mammal Studies has documented 108 dolphin carcasses, many with freshwater lesions. In fact, this year's re-opening of the spillway has coincided with more observed dolphin deaths than the 2010 BP oil spill. Along the Mississippi coast, April was the deadliest month for dolphins and sea turtles observed in the last five years. While the ecosystem can eventually recover, the near-term impacts are real and require mitigation.

In addition to the environmental damage caused when spillways release vast amounts of freshwater containing pollutants from upstream, the economic lifeblood of the region is threatened. Mississippi's celebrated oysters have had their populations decimated – the last crab catch yielded a third less crabs than average – and significantly decreased shrimp sampling will likely delay the opening of this year's season. The Mississippi coast is a sportsman's paradise and home to a flourishing seafood industry marked by world-renowned oyster beds and shrimping grounds. Collectively, these distinguishing elements form the heart of South Mississippi.

Furthermore, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Geological Survey forecast that this year's hypoxia – or “dead zone” – in the Gulf could potentially reach a record-setting size. With this danger on the horizon, it is clear that the heavy flooding in the Mississippi River Valley in 2019 will have an even greater detrimental effect on Mississippi and the Gulf Coast's marine resources.

Given this situation, we agree with Governor Phil Bryant that the Department of Commerce should assist these stressed Mississippi interests. Declaring a federal fisheries disaster will help negatively impacted ecosystems and coastal communities begin recovery efforts.

Sincerely,



ROGER F. WICKER
United States Senator



STEVEN M. PALAZZO
Member of Congress