



Gulf Organizations Join in Call for Gulf-Wide Seafood Specific Disaster Relief



“The opening of the Morganza Spillway will cause severe damage to the Atchafalaya Basin, our nation’s largest estuary,” said the Louisiana Lt. Governor whose office oversees the State’s Seafood Board. The Morganza Spillway shown while open for the first time in 1973. Photo: U.S. Army Corp of Engineers

First coordinated effort to secure declaration of emergency funds after repeated threats to coastal businesses and an important food source

by Ed Lallo, Gulf Seafood News Editor

Year after year after year, the Gulf of Mexico seafood community has been drowning in one disaster after another with little relief from the government agencies. Now, the floodgates are about to open, drowning all hopes that this year will be any different from years past.

As a result of record flooding in the central United States, the gates of the Morganza Spillway are set to send fresh water into a fragile ecosystem that is home to a wide variety of Gulf seafood. Louisiana Lt. Governor Billy Nungesser, the **Gulf Seafood Foundation** and other Gulf-wide organizations are calling for Gulf State governors to make a coordinated request of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to declare a state of emergency existing specific to Gulf seafood and its related industries.

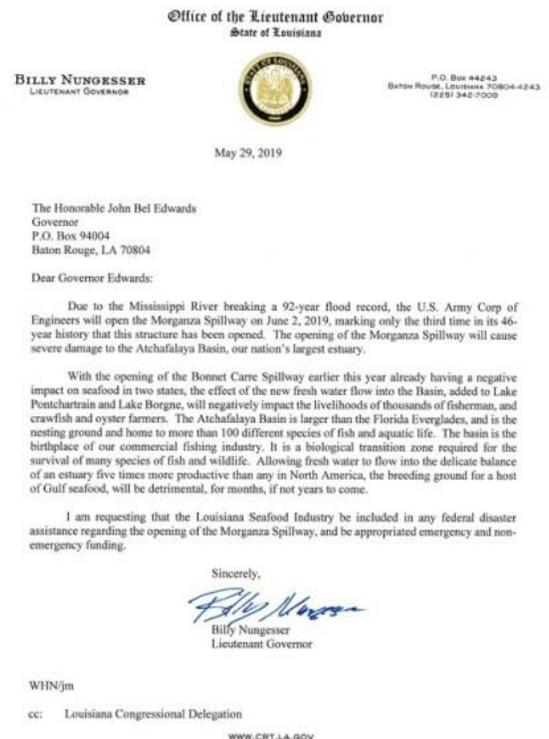
Nungesser, whose office oversees the State's Louisiana's Seafood Board, and the Gulf Seafood Foundation have worked closely to form a Gulf-wide coalition consisting of the **Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance**, Louisiana Shrimp Task Force, **Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board**, **Texas Shrimp Association**, **Oyster South**, **Mississippi Commercial Fisheries United**, Port Arthur Area Shrimpers Association and the Louisiana Crawfish Task Force.

"The opening of the Morganza Spillway will cause severe damage to the Atchafalaya Basin, our nation's largest estuary," said the Louisiana Lt. Governor whose office oversees the State's Seafood Board. "The opening of the Bonnet Carre Spillway earlier this year already has negatively impacted seafood in Lake Pontchartrain and Borgney, as well as fisheries in Mississippi. New fresh water flow into the Basin will further impact the livelihoods of thousands of Gulf fisherman, as well as crawfish and oyster farmers. My office is also asking Congress to include assistance for the Gulf seafood industry in any future disaster recovery bills."

"The Atchafalaya is larger than the Florida Everglades. It is the nesting ground and home to more than 100 different species of fish and aquatic life," said Jim Gossen, president of the Gulf Seafood Foundation. "The basin is the birthplace of our commercial fishing industry. It is a biological transition zone required for



"The opening of the Morganza Spillway will cause severe damage to the Atchafalaya Basin, our nation's largest estuary," said the Louisiana Lt. Governor whose office oversees the State's Seafood Board. Photo: Ed Lallo/Lallo Photography



the survival of many species of fish and wildlife. The entering floodwaters will be detrimental to that natural balance for months, if not years to come.”

Gossen said the Gulf organizations are calling for a unified show of support by all Gulf State governors to come to the aid of a seafood industry that has been in steady decline since Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the BP Oil Spill in 2010. “We are planning to have this petition on the desks of all Gulf governors as soon as possible.”

“The continuous storms from the Texas to Kansas, Minnesota to Ohio and beyond, have directly affected the seafood industries industry. Fishermen across the Gulf are still facing financial hurdles from created by Red Tide, hurricanes and water quality issues encountered during the past year,” said the former chairman of Houston-based Sysco Louisiana Seafood. “Our seafood industries are facing a disaster and it’s time we all work together to make it right.”

According to FEMA, businesses in a declared disaster area may be eligible for financial assistance from the Small Business Administration (SBA), as well as a host of other services.

The Atchafalaya Basin

Sitting on the Mississippi River at Mile 280, the Morganza Spillway stands between the river and the Atchafalaya Basin of south-Central Louisiana. Continued rain and flooding in the upper midwest river basins feeding the Mississippi are forcing the Army Corp of Engineers to begin to opening in June the spillway gates for only third time in in its 65-year history.

The Atchafalaya Basin is a brackish marshland. Allowing an unprecedented amount of fresh water to flow into the delicate balance of an estuary five times more productive than any in North America will be devastating to the breeding grounds for a host of Gulf seafood.

As the gates of Morganza open, it will most likely bring an early end to what previously was a prosperous crawfish season for Pat Cemptet and her husband Johnny, owners of a dock in Berwick, LA. At the height of crawfish season, her company, **Johnny’s Seafood and Bait**, currently is processes more than 800 sacks-a-day of crawfish caught in the marshes of the Atchafalaya Basin by her 54 fishermen.

“Opening those gates will shut crawfish down and crabs in the basin will head into the Gulf,” she and her husband explained. “It will be like opening the



“The Atchafalaya is larger than the Florida Everglades. It is the nesting ground and home to more than 100 different species of fish and aquatic life,” said Jim Gossen, president of the Gulf Seafood Foundation. Photo: Ed Lallo/Gulf Seafood News



Johnny’s Seafood and Bait currently is processes more than 800 sacks-a-day of crawfish caught in the marshes of the Atchafalaya Basin by her 54 fishermen. As the gates of Morganza open, it will most likely bring an early end to what previously was a prosperous crawfish season. Photo: Frank Randol/Gulf Seafood Foundation.

gate of a cattle pen. The fresh water reduces the salinity of the water to a level our seafood will have a difficult time surviving. We only hope that the crawfish might come back when the water is goes down.”

Cemplet says being a fisherman has been tough for the past few years and hopes that some kind of relief might be forthcoming. “I really don’t see it getting better, but I will keep at it because someone has to fight for the fishermen.”

“A tremendous amount of fresh water entering the basin at this time of year is devastating to our industry,” said Adam Johnson of Bayou Land Seafood, LLC and president of the Louisiana Crawfish Processors Alliance. “The rice paddies where crawfish are grown as aquaculture are being drained to plant so processors were in the process of transitioning to wild caught. History tells us that opening the Morganza will shut down the wild crawfish catch and at the same time shut down processing. This will mean a shortage of crawfish tail meat for the offseason.”



Pat Cemplet and her husband Johnny, owners of a dock in Berwick, LA. “Opening those gates will shut crawfish down and crabs in the basin will head into the Gulf,” she and her husband explained. Photo: Frank Randol/Gulf Seafood Foundation

Bonnet Carre Spillway

Earlier this year the gates on Louisiana’s Bonnet Carre Spillway were opened to allow the Mississippi water to flow through Lake Pontchartrain and its estuaries on the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Fishermen in Louisiana and Mississippi who depend on the area have seen a steady marked decline in all types of seafood fish since the fresh water entered.

“There is an unprecedented amount of fresh water entering the Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Borne area,” said Gary Bauer, owner of **Pontchartrain Blue Crab**, a processing facility in Slidell. “The usual brackish waterpontchartrain blue crabs of the area have had zero salinity for more than two months. Crabs and other species are not where they are usually are found for this time of the year. They have been displaced by copious amounts of freshwater. Our fishermen are struggling to make a living.



Gary Bauer of Lake Pontchartrain Blue Crabs conducting business from his cell during the Deepwater Horizon crisis. Photo: Ed Lallo/Lallo Photography

“In the business of seafood you have to have hope,” he went on to say. “I am holding out hope that my business might survive, but right now it doesn’t look good, and frankly I don’t have a ‘Plan B’ going forward.”

According to Jack Montoucet, Louisiana Secretary of Wildlife and Fisheries, documentation on the effects of the freshwater started when the Bonne Carre gates opened.

“We are so used to having disasters in Louisiana we have a system in place to start gathering data on how seafood is affected,” said Montoucet. “ We having been taking water samples and testing in Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Borne, and will open new test sites in the Atchafalaya when the Morganza gates open. Test results so far are starting to show some negative results.”



“We are so used to having disasters in Louisiana we have a system in place to start gathering data on how seafood is affected,” said Jack Montoucet, Louisiana Secretary of Wildlife and Fisheries. Photo: LDWF

The Secretary is meeting with Governor John Bel Edwards to decide the best course of action going forward. “If a declaration is forthcoming, and money is made available, we want to have all our documentation in place so our fishermen and seafood industries can benefit as soon as possible.”

Ryan Bradley, executive director of the Mississippi Commercial Fisheries United, enumerated the challenges since the Bonne Carre spillway opened. “Mississippi’s marine resources, fisherman, coastal businesses, restaurants and tourism have been adversely affected since the spillway opened,” he said. “It has exacerbating the cumulative, long-term impacts on our fisheries that we are now witnessing. Millions of dollars of oyster restoration efforts will be set back to scratch.

Bradley calls for new leadership and cooperation across the Gulf, both in the state capitals, as well as from all organizations with ties to the Gulf. “Together, we can rise from this current disaster to become a stronger, unified voice.”

Effects Across Gulf

“Many of our prized offshore species like red snapper and red grouper depend on healthy near near-shore environments at some point in their life cycles,” said Buddy Guindon, executive director of the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders’ Alliance, the largest organization of commercial snapper and grouper fishermen in the Gulf. “We’ve know how important good water quality is for a viable red grouper fishery in the Eastern Gulf, and we can’t afford to be complacent during times of disaster. We need to come together to keep strong and healthy fisheries across the Gulf of Mexico.”



“Many of our prized offshore species like red snapper and red grouper depend on healthy near near-shore environments at some point in their life cycles,” said Buddy Guindon, executive director of the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders’ Alliance. Photo: Ed Lallo/Lallo Photography

“The flood waters of the Mississippi River will certainly result in more nutrients entering the Gulf of Mexico,” said Louisiana Agricultural and Forestry Commissioner Mike Strain. “This will, in turn, cause a marked expansion of the dead zone. As a result, our Gulf seafood industry could be seriously compromised and it is imperative that we have a stable supply of safe, high-quality seafood to meet the growing demands of the consumers both nationally and globally.”

Gulf fisherman Lance Nacio of Montegut, LA is also fearful of the effects of the fresh water entering the Atchafalaya. “With both the Bonne Carre and Morganza open almost all of our estuaries will be inundated with fresh water. Shrimp, crab and other seafood will not have the right growing conditions,” he said. “These estuaries are the food source for the larger fish in the Gulf, this could have a ripple effect that could last for years.”

Nacio said that Louisiana’s estuaries have been continuously shrinking; both through loss of coastal land and with the building of the Morangza-to-Gulf levee system. “The levee system is essentially like drawing a line in the sand, it restricts the water flow needed in the estuaries for proper habitat. Year-after-year fishermen are seeing the negative effect.”

Kristen Baumer, owner of Paul Piazza & Son, Inc. and member of the American Shrimp Processors Association, states everyone shares the concerns of the effects of the ongoing floods across the mid U.S. “We are a resilient industry and will weather any storm,” he said. “We encourage all federal and state efforts to monitor the full impact of the floods and work to determine the full scope of impacts on marine industries. Meanwhile we will continue to supply premium wild caught shrimp to the American market as always.”

“An abundance of freshwater may change the water temperature and salinity level disrupting the overall ecosystem in a variety of ways,” said Andrea Hance, executive director of the Texas Shrimp Association. “These elements play an important roll in the juvenile shrimp growth and production which take place in our Gulf estuaries.”

“Living on the Gulf coast means surviving one natural disaster after another,” said Ed Chiles, son of former Florida Senator and Governor Lawton Chiles and founder of The



Gulf fisherman Lance Nacio of Montegut, LA is also fearful of the effects of the fresh water entering the Atchafalaya. Nacio has a fleet of shrimp and reef-fish boats and also hunts alligator. Photo: Ed Lallo/Lallo Photography



“Living on the Gulf coast means surviving one natural disaster after another,” said Ed Chiles, son of former Florida Senator and Governor Lawton Chiles. Photo: Ed Lallo/Lallo Photography

Chiles Group. “We are of hearty stock, but when state and federal aid is dispersed our fishing communities always seems to come up on the short end.”

Chiles explained, “As individuals, we are not allowed to flood our neighbors’ yards, but Louisiana’s estuaries are being flooded by the government for the common good. The damage being done needs justifies reparations. It is time to address the damage our seafood communities are suffering, not only in Louisiana, but also along the entire Gulf Coast. From restaurants to tourism, our coastal communities depend on our commercial fishing industry and its unique culture. All that could be lost.”

According to Beth Walton, executive director of Oyster South, opening the Morganza spillway will affect the salinity and water quality from Texas to Mississippi. “Oysters depend on good water quality. We already see them dying in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi because of the lack of salinity in the water,” she told *Gulf Seafood News*.

“Just when we had a bit of good news that Texas will allow oyster aquaculture, this disaster will cause extreme hardship for all those who depend upon Gulf oysters, be they wild or aquaculture. In addition, Florida and Alabama oyster and clam growers are facing a Red Tide epidemic that has grown to last ever increasing lengths of time. We need to have our fishermen and farmers protected in this time of need.”

Chris Nelson, owner of **Bon Secour Fisheries** in Mobile, AL, thinks everyone should get behind a disaster relief bill that includes processors as well as fishermen. “From an oyster standpoint this is a disaster for processors especially. Lack of production will once again hit our bottom line by dropping volume and raising cost of production across the board.

Gulf States Need to Work Together

Gossen said the coalition wants to reach across party lines and work in unison to ensure the survival of Gulf coast fishermen and its the seafood industry. “We have a unique opportunity to become united in a cause that is an important part of our unique heritage. Texas, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana are all dependent upon the Gulf waters and the fishermen that bring their harvest to our table.



According to Beth Walton, executive director of Oyster South, opening the Morganza spillway will affect the salinity and water quality from Texas to Mississippi. The freshwater is already killing oysters from Texas to Mississippi, including these on Grand Isle, LA. Photo: Jim Gossen/Gulf Seafood Foundation



Chris Nelson, owner of Bon Secour Fisheries in Mobile, AL, thinks everyone should get behind a disaster relief bill that includes processors as well as fishermen. Photo: Ed Lallo/Lallo Photography

“If all five Gulf States work together during this period of crisis,, it could be the opportunity needed to raise our seafood to a higher level,” said Raz Halili, the Foundation’s vice president and manager of Texas based **Prestige Oysters**. “It is important that we look beyond state boundaries and work together going forward if we are to survive as an industry. We have all overcome adversity before, it is important to become stronger and smarter going forward.”

“The Gulf Seafood Foundation’s mission is to educate and facilitate, not legislate,” said Father Sinclair Oubre, treasurer of the Port Arthur Area Shrimpers Association and board member of the Foundation. “The organization has a scope and range covering, but not limited to, the Gulf of Mexico and its bordering states. In times of crisis like this, we want to work with all organizations for the betterment of our fishermen and seafood industries to accomplish our mission.



“The Atchafalaya is where the road ends and Gulf seafood begins,” said Chalin Delaune of the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board. Photo: Rusty Randol/Gulf Seafood Foundation

Chalin Delaune, of the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board and vice- president of **Tommy’s Seafood** in New Orleans, sees a need for a united Gulf seafood community. “Each year there seems to be another new obstacle that the Gulf seafood industry must face. We are not Louisiana fishermen, Alabama fishermen, Florida, Texas or Mississippi; we are all Gulf fishermen.”

“The Atchafalaya is where the road ends and Gulf seafood begins,” he said. “We need to pave a new path for the whole Gulf seafood industry going forward. This is the time and place to start a new spirit of cooperation to ensure the survival of our seafood industries.”

<http://gulfseafoodnews.com/2019/05/30/gulf-organizations-join-in-call-for-gulf-wide-seafood-specific-disaster-relief/>