

Miss. Sound Coalition Says U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Wrong About Bonnet Carré Spillway's Impact on Mississippi Oysters and Marine Life

BILOXI, Miss., Jan. 8, 2024 - Today, the Mississippi Sound Coalition (MSSC) released its rebuttal to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' claim that openings of the Bonnet Carré Spillway cause only "minor" impacts on oysters and marine life in the Mississippi Sound.

Coalition attorney, Robert Wiygul, sent the rebuttal to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), a United States federal agency within the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in response to the Corps' recent report of impacts of Spillway Operations on Essential Fish Habitat of the Mississippi Sound. In a lawsuit brought by the Mississippi Sound Coalition, U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola, Jr. ordered the Corps to make the report in consultation with NMFS no later than Feb. 13, 2024.

The Coalition said, "[The Corps'] key assertions of 'minor and temporary' impacts of Bonnet Carré Spillway Operations . . . are contrary to the available data and scientific literature. Many other assertions lack any citation to data or literature and are essentially unsupported opinion."

The Coalition provides evidence in its rebuttal that, "The 2019 Bonnet Carré Spillway openings caused oyster mortality at a scale that has prevented re-establishment of the reefs."

"Repeated Mississippi River water releases from the Bonnet Carré in 2011, 2016, 2018 and 2019 came into our Sound, reduced the salinity and killed our natural oyster beds," said Ryan Bradley, a commercial fisherman and Executive Director of Mississippi Commercial Fisheries United, a member of MSSC and also a plaintiff in the aforementioned lawsuit. "As our memo says, five years later, they've still not been able to re-establish."

It is the Coalition's hope that its rebuttal will bring to light deficiencies found in the Corps report so that working together, as was required in the court order, the Corps and National Marine Fisheries can either respond to MSSC's memo or amend their report by the February 13, 2024 deadline with information that is more substantiated by science and facts.

As stated in the rebuttal, "the Corps has full authority to modify Bonnet Carré Spillway operations and has done so in the past."

"It is our hope that MSSC's efforts will influence these modifications with facts and information. Our goal is to Save our Sound before it's too late," said Gerald Blessey, Manager of the Coalition. "We

must stand up and protect our Mississippi Sound way of life, livelihoods and economy while we have the chance.”

For access to media assets and documents referenced in this release, or to obtain further information or schedule interviews with Coalition leaders, lawyers, or members, please contact Sarah Duffey at The Focus Group.

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MISSISSIPPI SOUND COALITION (MSSC)

The Mississippi Sound Coalition (MSSC) desires to restore and protect the Mississippi Sound estuary and the economy and way of life that depend on it. Its efforts are focused on causing changes in public policies at national, state and local levels to prevent further damage from the polluted water of the Mississippi River that is released periodically by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from the Bonnet Carré Spillway in Louisiana and intrudes into the Mississippi Sound. MSSC also focuses on other threats to the Sound such as the Mid-Breton Sediment Diversion project, also in Louisiana. The Coalition provides public education on the subject, and, if necessary, engages in litigation. Members of the Coalition include Harrison County, Hancock County, the Mississippi cities of Biloxi, D'Iberville, Gulfport, Long Beach, Pass Christian, Diamondhead, Bay St. Louis, Waveland, Ocean Springs, Gautier, Pascagoula, the Mississippi Hotel & Lodging Association, and the Mississippi Commercial Fisheries United.