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Subject: NOAA measures largest Gulf dead zone ever

By Annie Snider

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Federal scientists have measured the largest dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico ever recorded, with this year's oxygen-depleted area covering a space roughly the size of New Jersey.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which lead the measurements, said the sprawling dead zone is fed by nutrient pollution washing down the Mississippi River, primarily from farms and urban and suburban runoff. Such "non-point pollution," in Clean Water Act parlance, is not federally regulated and is difficult to control. These nutrients spawn massive algae blooms that suck oxygen from the water as they decompose.

At 8,776 square miles, the dead zone continues to grow despite efforts launched in the 1990s to shrink it. A task force of state and federal agencies had set a goal in 2001 that aimed for the dead zone to be more than four and a half times smaller by now.

Scientists estimate that to shrink the dead zone to the goal of 1,900 square miles would require a 45 percent reduction in nutrient pollution along the Mississippi River. In 2015, when the federal-state task force missed its goal, it said it would take another two decades to reach those levels using voluntary, state-led efforts. The task force set an interim goal of cutting pollution by 20 percent by 2025.

WHAT'S NEXT: State and federal agencies have promoted voluntary efforts to measure and study nutrient pollution problems in the U.S., but the Trump administration has shown little interest in potentially controversial, more hands-on efforts to stanch nutrient pollution.

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