

REMARKS for SECRETARY MIKE NAIG



2023 Hypoxia Task Force Annual Meeting

Good afternoon. My name is Mike Naig and I'm the Iowa Secretary of Agriculture.

It's great to be with you all again this year - to welcome some new faces and to re-connect with many friends and colleagues.

To our hosts from Arkansas, thank you for welcoming us to your state for this annual meeting. Northwest Arkansas is certainly beautiful any time of year.

Though I serve as Iowa Secretary of Agriculture, in this capacity I am participating as co-chair of the Gulf of Mexico Hypoxia Task Force representing the states.

Radhika Fox of the EPA serves as the other co-chair. Thank you to Bruno Pigott for representing EPA here this week.

By bringing together the states and federal family of agencies, the Hypoxia Task Force creates opportunities to coordinate, communicate and collaborate as we address barriers to progress and consider resource and research needs.

All of this is in service to our end goal: improving water quality and mitigating the hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico.

As we push forward, it's important to also keep the big picture in mind. Context is key. There are many stakeholders who have a vested interest in the health and future of the Mississippi River.

First and foremost, we must consider the significance of the Mississippi River.

It is the second largest river in North America, connecting all or parts of 31 states. The drainage basin spans 1.2 million square miles.

Hundreds of millions of tons of goods worth billions of dollars move up and down the river. That economic activity is important to the livelihoods of many people.

It is essential that we maintain the ability to use the Mississippi as an inland waterway. It supports the economies of many of the communities in our states.

Our agriculture must also remain productive, as consumers here and around the world depend on us – God willing – three times a day.

All of us care about protecting the quality of the water and preserving this important resource for generations to come.

It's yet another reminder of why we must always strike a balance between commerce, water quality, and water quantity and ensure the long-term ability to live, work, and play in the region.

Each summer, the hypoxic zone is measured and it's one of many important indicators used by the task force to judge progress. It is obviously good news that the measurement is smaller than average again this year.

However, we must also recognize the many variables that contribute to the size from year to year – and it does fluctuate. Water flow and precipitation throughout the basin are key factors. We should remember this important fact every year.

But we also must recognize that there is a significant amount of impactful work happening in the states that make up this watershed. We're acting. We're implementing. We're making things happen in the states.

This work is making a difference.

With the help of both public and private partners in urban and rural areas, states are accelerating the work.

These implementation steps will only continue to positively impact our water quality at home and downstream for years to come.

Each state is taking on the challenge of reducing nutrient loss and implementing their own tailored nutrient reduction strategies.

States are also developing or enhancing dedicated funding sources that can help build and sustain the momentum.

Each of our states are different and have unique geographic features. As such, our plans must address the specialized needs of each of our states and our communities.

Our efforts have allowed us to attract more public and private partners, in addition to federal funding from both the EPA and USDA.

As the states' co-chair, I want to highlight a few examples from our states...these are new developments in the past year.

For example:

Iowa

- We're knocking on the door of 4 million acres of cover crops, a strong level of growth from approximately 10,000 acres a decade ago.
- We commemorated the 10-year anniversary of our Nutrient Reduction Strategy this spring and the flow weighted results are showing improvements in both phosphorous and nitrogen.
- We announced an expanded partnership with Ducks Unlimited on plans to construct 60 water quality wetlands – adding private sector capacity.
- We are expanding our “Batch and Build” agreements with a wide range of partners from individual counties to the Iowa Pork Producers – these agreements allow us to batch together many more edge-of-field practices for quicker implementation.
- Ag Organizations are signing on promoting water quality and soil health practices within their networks such as the Iowa Cattlemen Association, Iowa Seed Association, and Ag Retail and Processing Companies.
- Our cost-share programs continue to see record utilization – in dollars spent, dollars leveraged, and in total practices implemented.

Arkansas

- Arkansas invested in educational outreach initiatives to bolster awareness and advocacy for high-priority watersheds. Notable programs include the Arkansas Watershed Stewardship Program, designed to equip individuals with the skills to identify, prevent, and address water quality issues.
- The Tap Your Potential initiative focuses on empowering farmers to become leaders in watershed management through targeted training.
- Arkansas expanded water quality monitoring and two stage ditch practices in the Cache River Watershed, which is one of the highest contributing watersheds of nitrogen and phosphorus in Arkansas. Work continues to develop partnerships with local producers to initiate construction.
- Arkansas garnered valuable insights and potential recommendations for advancement of the Arkansas Nutrient Reduction Strategy (ANRS) from two dedicated workgroups.
- Arkansas released the Arkansas Nutrient Reduction Viewer. This innovative tool shows the reductions in nitrogen and phosphorus resulting from conservation practice implementation.

Minnesota

- Minnesota has had 1.5 million acres of new adoption in soil health related practices since its Nutrient Reduction Strategy was completed in 2014.
- Over 1 million acres have now been certified under the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program and 75 percent of certified farmers add nutrient or soil health practices after being certified.
- All 80 watersheds in Minnesota now have completed a technical strategy for reducing nutrients and other pollutants and local water planners are using these strategies to determine where and how to implement them.

Wisconsin

- Wisconsin DNR is using Gulf Hypoxia Program funds to employ a full-time Nutrient Reduction Strategy Coordinator who is leading the process to revise the state's strategy, which was initially published in 2013. Interagency collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and communicating progress are high priorities for the NRS revision process.

Ohio

- Have completed 17 wetlands in the Ohio River Basin with another 37 wetlands in progress.
- Have added incentives to Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program for the Scioto River Watershed and expanding into the Miami River.
- Have added technical assistance staff in the Ohio River Basin.
- Completed statewide HUC watershed planning.
- Have added 10 new HUC 12 Nonpoint Source Implementation Strategies.
- An update of Ohio's Nutrient Reduction Strategy has commenced.
- A septic cleanout program accompanied by information and education has been initiated in Southeast Ohio.
- A cascading waterway has been constructed and is being monitored for effectiveness.

Illinois

- The point source sector has achieved a phosphorus reduction of 6.2 million pounds, or 34% since 2011, which surpasses the 2025 interim goal of 25% reduction for this sector.
- Through a state and federal leverage-funded capacity building initiative between the State of Illinois Department of Agriculture and NRCS, the Agroecology + Innovation Matters project was initiated. Collaborating with NRCS field offices, soil and water conservation districts, producers, and landowners across the state, Illinois' 40 Conservation Planners and Coordinators aim to enhance soil health, reduce nutrient loss, maintain clean waters, and bolster the advancement of best conservation practices.

Missouri

- Missouri's total phosphorus reduction rule became effective on October 30. This rule was created to reduce total phosphorous (TP) point source loading into Missouri's waters. This rule is anticipated to reduce TP loading from affected point sources by over 60%.
- Missouri is working to establish a Nutrient Trading Program. This program will serve as a compliance assistance tool allowing point source facilities to achieve nutrient targets or standards.
- Missouri Section 319 has partnered with Understanding Ag to provide mentorship opportunities for agricultural landowners regarding nutrient management.
- Missouri is developing nutrient TMDLs for lakes and reservoirs and expects to make drafts available for public comment in the spring.
- Missouri established the James River Watershed Permitting Framework to implement the nutrient reduction goals of an existing TMDL.
- Missouri's Soil and Water Conservation Program and Missouri Soil and Water Conservation Districts cost-shared on 40 million dollars in soil and water conservation in fiscal year 2023.

Louisiana

- Through the Gulf Hypoxia Program support, Louisiana enrolled 8,000 acres in Tensas (Ten-saw) Parish for targeted BMP implementation, including planting cover crops this fall.

Indiana

- Indiana had an historic \$5 million increase in conservation funding appropriated by the Indiana General Assembly for the Clean Water Indiana Program.

Kentucky

- The Kentucky Division of Water and USGS eliminated the state's largest nutrient monitoring gap through additional flow gauges and increased water quality monitoring.
- Kentucky kicked off its Nutrient Reduction Strategy Update through inter and intra-state workgroups that reached over 100 partners.

Tennessee

- The Tennessee Plant Optimization Program (TNPOP) is a free initiative designed to assist wastewater operators in optimizing nutrient removal and energy efficiency in their facilities. With approximately 20 participating plants to date, TNPOP offers resources and support for achieving these goals through cost-effective measures. Within the next 5 years, the plan is to reach the remaining 160 municipal mechanical wastewater plants with this program.
- The Tennessee Department of Agriculture collaborated with the University of Tennessee to design, conduct, and publish the first annual Nutrient Management Survey of Tennessee producers in early 2023. Respondents farmed a total of 1.7 million acres, and 86% of all crop producers surveyed perform soil tests, while 80% of pasture/hay producers surveyed perform soil tests. The trends in this survey point to more cover crops, no till, soil testing, and use of nitrogen stabilizers than 5 years ago, and similar increases are expected in the next 5 years. Planning for the 2024 survey is underway now.

These are just a sampling of the success stories from some of the states.

Each of the Hypoxia Task Force states is committed to showing continuous progress toward our Nutrient Reduction Strategy goals. We all have a vested interest in protecting our water and this working river.

But make no mistake, though we are making progress – we are far from satisfied.

We know there is more work to do.

We need significant funding, technical and construction resources, and we need more municipalities, businesses and farmers and landowners to say yes to participating.

Just as all technology evolves, so too do our soil conservation and water quality practices. We're continuously learning, testing, and driving new science-based practices that will make an even greater impact on our shared resources.

Our dedicated conservation professionals are working day-in and day-out alongside municipalities, farmers, and landowners to enhance water quality in our communities.

But we also face inefficiencies and bottlenecks that slow down or hamper our progress.

States face permitting, process, and approval challenges that either needlessly slow us down or prevent us from acting entirely. We need our federal partners to work with us on finding common sense solutions.

And of course, we all face staff and infrastructure capacity challenges. We must continue to find creative solutions to our workforce challenges.

As I conclude, on behalf of the states, I want to again thank all the partners who are working across the region on this journey to make impactful progress in the Mississippi River basin.

It's only by continuing to work together and leveraging our resources that we can further accelerate these meaningful efforts. While we are proud of our progress, each of us knows that there is much more work to do in the years and decades ahead.

But I am optimistic for what's ahead because I know individually – and collectively - that we are up to the challenge.

Thank you very much for being here and I wish you a safe journey home, a wonderful holiday season and a productive start to 2024.