

Office of the Governor
State of Louisiana

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GOVERNOR



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

Secretary Ross:

The extreme duration of high Mississippi River levels since December 2018 has necessitated unprecedented efforts by the U.S. Corps of Engineers to mitigate the threat of levee failures in Louisiana. Such efforts have included the opening of the Bonnet Carré Spillway twice this year; first in late February and again in early May. That structure continues to pass large volumes of river water into Lake Pontchartrain which subsequently flows east into Lake Borgne and Mississippi Sound. The extreme influx of freshwater has greatly reduced salinity levels in our coastal waters and disrupted estuarine productivity.

Marine biologists with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) have been monitoring and documenting impacts to both the seafood species and fishing industries since early March 2019. Once salinities dropped below the threshold for oyster survival, weekly sampling began on the public oyster reefs of St. Bernard Parish. The most recent sampling of oyster reefs indicated a mortality range of 14% up to 100%. Private oyster leaseholders in nearby areas have indicated to LDWF they have suffered between 50% and 100% mortality on their oyster reefs, with additional mortalities still ongoing in multiple areas. With such extreme mortalities to the oyster resources, commercial harvests from the public grounds have declined as much as 88% for the March – April time period compared to previous years, and 34% from private leases.

Ongoing LDWF restoration efforts utilizing private oyster hatchery products have also been greatly impacted by low salinities caused by flood waters. Millions of baby oysters being staged at a nursery location in the marshes of St. Bernard Parish have been lost due to low salinity, and future restoration efforts have been put on hold until salinities rebound to levels that will support oyster survival. Such flood-induced impacts have delayed our ability to perform critical oyster recovery and recreational fishing reef projects. It will be important to utilize oyster hatchery capacity in the future to help jumpstart recovery of the oyster resources and provide valuable reef habitat for recreationally-important fish.

Other commercially-important species have experienced drastic impacts as well. Statewide shrimp landings (brown and white shrimp combined) declined by 30% for the month of March, and 61% for the month of April, when compared to the five-year average. Low salinity waters inhibit the growth and recruitment of larval brown shrimp and LDWF biological sampling has shown very few brown shrimp in our coastal bays and bayous giving an early indication of a poor commercial brown shrimp season. Blue crab productivity has also been impacted as landings have decreased by 37% for the month

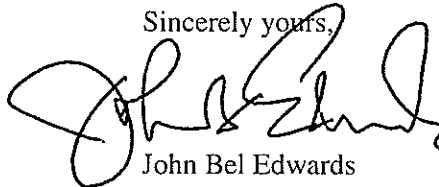
of March, and 42% for the month of April when compared to the five-year average across all of coastal Louisiana.

Impacts to our recreational fishing sector have also been felt as prized species such as spotted seatrout (speckled trout) and red drum (redfish) are being landed by anglers in much lower numbers. Statewide landings of speckled trout have dropped 40% when compared to the five-year average. Recreational anglers have landed 11% less redfish so far in 2019 as compared to the five-year average. Such low catches invariably lead to heavy economic impacts to those businesses that support the recreational fishing industry such as marinas and bait shops.

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries continues to document the impacts of the 2019 flood event on important fishery species and the fishing industry in Louisiana. Although the full impacts of this flood event will not be determined for some time, especially in light of the continued operation of the Bonnet Carre' Spillway, I respectfully request that your department begin the initiation of a federal fisheries disaster declaration. Such a declaration is consistent with federal law under both the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act (IJFA). We are extremely grateful for any assistance you and your department can provide as our state and our residents continue to suffer from the flooding impacts. Such a declaration of a federal fisheries disaster for Louisiana may help in obtaining federal financial assistance for our fishers, processors, docks, and for the state to help rehabilitate the important fishery species upon which our seafood industry relies.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this request. If needed, please contact LDWF Secretary Jack Montoucet at 225.765.2806 or via email at jmontoucet@wlf.la.gov to discuss further. Both he and his staff stand at the ready to provide any additional information you may need as we all work together on behalf of the seafood industry and coastal resources to recover from this challenging flood event.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Bel Edwards". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "B".

John Bel Edwards
Governor