

2015 Forecast: Summer Hypoxic Zone Size Northern Gulf of Mexico

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Abstract

Each year a hypoxic water mass with oxygen concentrations $\leq 2 \text{ mg l}^{-1}$ forms in bottom waters of the northern Gulf of Mexico continental shelf. The low oxygen conditions threaten living resources including humans that depend on fish, shrimp and crabs. Nutrients from the Mississippi River watershed, particularly nitrogen and phosphorus, fertilize the Gulf's surface waters to create excessive amounts of algal biomass, whose decomposition in the bottom layer leads to oxygen distress and even organism death in the Gulf's richest waters. Various models use the May nitrogen load of the Mississippi River as the main driving force to predict the size of this hypoxic zone in late July. This prediction is based on one of these models.

The June 2015 forecast of the size of the hypoxic zone in the northern Gulf of Mexico for late July 2015 is that it will cover $15,120 \text{ km}^2$ ($5,838 \text{ mi}^2$) of the bottom of the continental shelf off Louisiana and Texas. The 95% confidence interval is that it will be between $12,978$ and $16,879 \text{ km}^2$ ($5,011$ and $6,517 \text{ mi}^2$). This estimate is based on the assumption that there are no significant tropical storms occurring in the two weeks before the monitoring cruise, or during the cruise. If a storm does occur, then the size of the zone is predicted to be 70% of the predicted size without the storm, equivalent to $10,584 \text{ km}^2$ ($4,087 \text{ mi}^2$).

The predicted hypoxic area is about the area of Connecticut and slightly larger than the 5-year running average of $14,640 \text{ km}^2$. If the area of hypoxia becomes as large as predicted, it will equal about three times the size of the goal of the Hypoxia Action Plan (less than $5,000 \text{ km}^2$). No progress has been made in reducing the nitrate loading.

Caveats: 1) This prediction discounts the effect of large storm events that temporarily disrupt the physical and biological system attributes promoting the formation of the low oxygen zone in bottom waters; 2) The potential space on the shelf where hypoxia occurs is limited by the bathymetry; 3) The predictions assume that there will be no abrupt changes in discharge from now through July; 4) Unusual weather patterns affecting coastal winds, as experienced in 2009 and 2011, may skew the prediction to be lower.

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Introduction

Hypoxic water masses in bottom waters of the northern Gulf of Mexico occur when the oxygen concentration falls below 2 mg l^{-1} . This hypoxic water is distributed across the Louisiana shelf west of the Mississippi River and onto the upper Texas coast, from near shore to as much as 125 km offshore, and in water depths up to 60 m (Rabalais et al. 2007; Figures 1 and 2). It has been found in all months, but is most persistent and severe in spring and summer (Turner et al. 2005; Rabalais et al. 2007). The July distribution of hypoxic waters most often is a single continuous zone along the Louisiana and adjacent Texas shelf. Hypoxia also occurs east of the Mississippi River delta, but covers less area and is ephemeral. These areas are sometimes called ‘dead zones’ in the popular press because of the absence of commercial quantities of shrimp and fish in the bottom layer. The number of dead zones throughout the world has been increasing in the last several decades and currently totals over 550 (Díaz and Rosenberg 2008; Rabalais et al. 2010; Conley et al. 2011). The dead zone off the Louisiana coast is the second largest human-caused coastal hypoxic area in the global ocean.

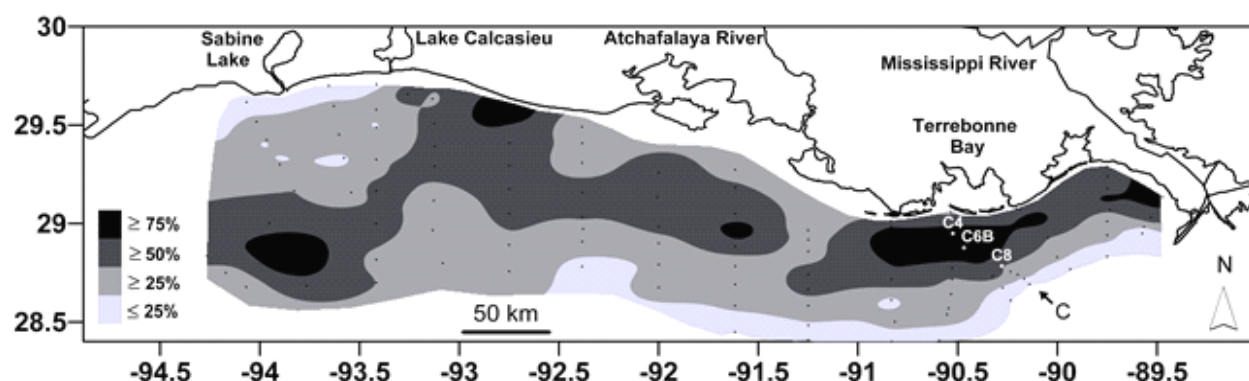
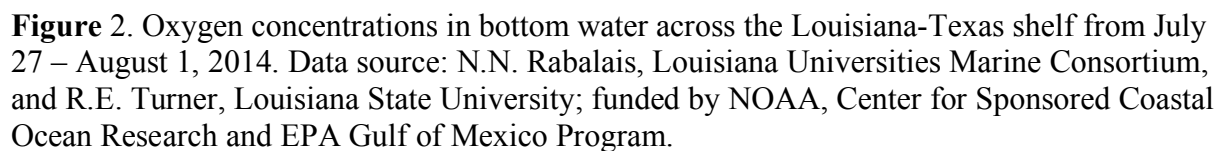


Figure 1. The frequency of mid-summer hypoxia (oxygen $\leq 2 \text{ mg l}^{-1}$) over the 70 to 90 station grid on the Louisiana and Texas shelf during the summer from 1985 to 2008. Stations C4, C6B and C8 are labeled on the C transect. Modified from Rabalais et al. (2007).



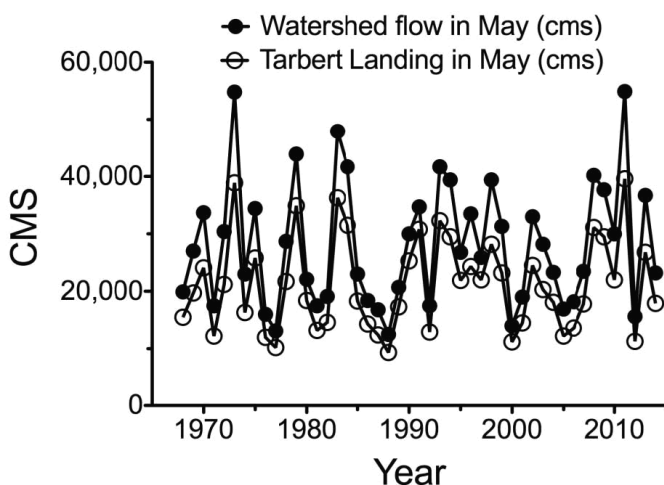
Hypoxic water masses form from spring to fall on this coast because the consumption of oxygen in bottom water layers exceeds the re-supply of oxygen from the atmosphere. The reaeration rate is negatively influenced by stratification of the water column, which is primarily dependent on the river's freshwater discharge and accentuated by summer warming. The overwhelming supply of organic matter respired in the bottom layer is from the downward flux of organic matter produced in the surface layer. The transport to the bottom layer is the result of sinking of individual cells, as the excretory products of the grazing predators (zooplankton) that 'package' them as fecal pellets, or as aggregates of cells, detritus and mucus. The respiration of this organic matter declines as it falls through the water column (Turner et al. 1998), but the descent rate is rapid enough that most respiration occurs in the bottom layer and in the sediments.

The amount of organic matter produced in the surface waters is primarily limited by the supply of nitrogen, not phosphorus (Scavia and Donnelly 2007; Turner and Rabalais 2013). The evidence for this conclusion is that the supply, or loading, of nitrogen (primarily in the form of nitrate-N) from the Mississippi River watershed to the continental shelf within the last few decades is positively related to chlorophyll *a* concentration (chl *a*; Walker and Rabalais 2006; R^2 0.30 – 0.42), the rate of primary production (Lohrenz et al. 1997, $R^2 > 0.77$; Lohrenz et al. 2008), and the spatial extent of the hypoxic area in summer (Turner et al. 2012; $R^2 > 0.9$). The size of the shelfwide hypoxic zone has increased since it began occurring in the 1970s, simultaneously with the rise in carbon sequestration in sediments, indicators of increased diatom production, and shifts in foraminiferal communities (Turner and Rabalais 1994; Sen Gupta et al. 1996; Turner et al. 2008). There is, therefore, a series of cause-and-effect arguments linking nitrogen loading in the river to phytoplankton production, to bottom water oxygen demand, and to the formation and maintenance of the largest hypoxic zone in the western Atlantic Ocean.

The oxygen consumption creates a zone of hypoxia that is constrained by the geomorphology of the shelf, horizontal water movement, stratification and vertical mixing (Obenour et al. 2012; Justić and Wang 2014). The significance of reducing nutrient loads to these coastal waters rests on the coupling between the organic matter produced in response to these nutrients and its respiration in the bottom layer (MRNGoM HTF 2001, 2008; Rabalais et al. 2002, 2007, 2010; SAB 2007). The primary driver of the increased nutrient loading is agricultural land use (Alexander et al. 2008; Broussard et al. 2009), which is strongly influenced by farm subsidies (Broussard et al. 2012). The amount of nutrient loading from the river has remained the same in recent decades, or is increasing (Sprague et al. 2011). Restoration of the coastal waters means, in large part, changing farming practices (Rabotyagov et al. 2014).

Mississippi River Discharge

Hypoxic conditions are dependent on river discharge because of the influence that water volume and salinity have on the physical structure of the water column and on the nutrient load delivered to the coastal zone. The nutrient load is dependent on the concentration of nutrients, primarily nitrogen, and on the discharge. River discharge is, therefore, a key environmental parameter of interest.



The Mississippi River discharge in May 2015 averaged $31,600 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$ (cms) (Appendix Figure 2), which is the 19th largest in 46 years from 1968 to 2015. This is almost exactly an average discharge for the interval (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The discharge in May for the Mississippi River watershed and south of St. Francisville, LA at Tarbert Landing, MS. CMS is cubic meters per second, $\text{m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$.

May Nitrogen Loading

The US Geological Survey (USGS) publishes monthly estimates of nitrogen loading and other aspects of water quality from the Mississippi River watershed into the Gulf of Mexico (<http://toxics.usgs.gov/hypoxia/mississippi/>). The USGS includes information on the data calculations, including an estimate of the 95% confidence range for the nitrogen load. The May nitrite+nitrate (NO_{2+3}) and total nitrogen (TN) load for the Mississippi River watershed for May is shown in Figure 4. Comparative information on the seasonal concentration of dissolved nitrite+nitrate in the Mississippi River at Baton Rouge, LA, is in Figure 5.

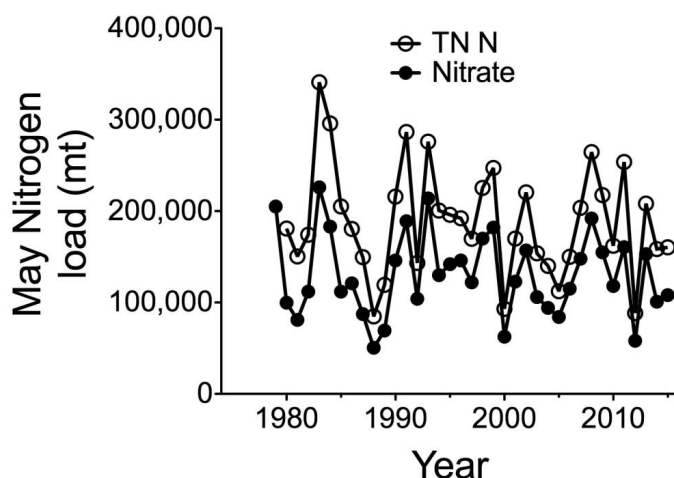
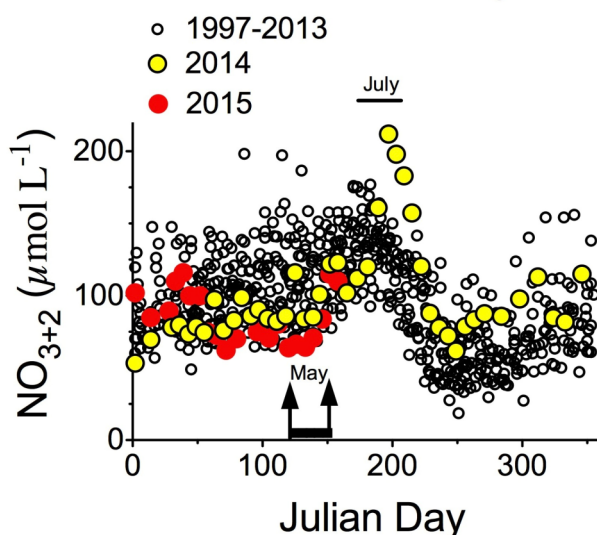


Figure 4. The annual nitrite+nitrate (NO_{2+3}) and total nitrogen (TN) load for the Mississippi River watershed for May. The estimates are from the USGS.

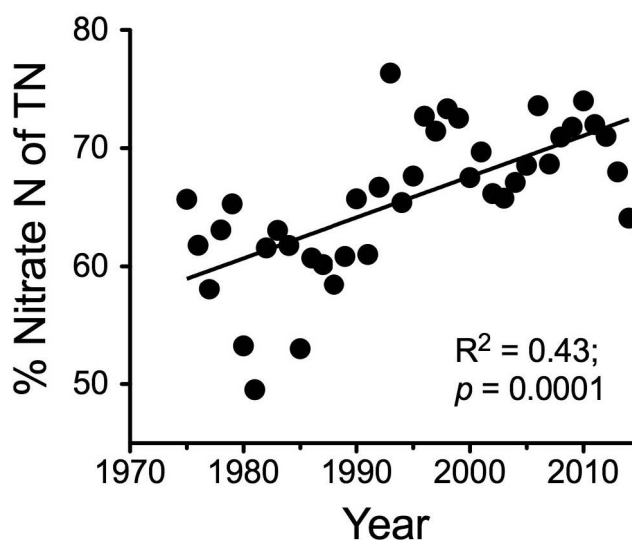
Figure 5. The concentration of nitrite+nitrate (NO_{2+3}) at Baton Rouge, LA from 1997 to present. Unpublished data from Turner et al.

Nitrate concentration at Baton Rouge, Louisiana



The concentration of nitrite+nitrate at Baton Rouge was relatively low in the winter of 2015, and was near the lowest values measured since 1997. The concentration rose at the end of May and is expected to rise through to the mapping cruise in July. The river discharge was a rather low level, however, to result in a May nitrite+nitrate loading that was equal to the average value (Figure 5). The total nitrogen load in May is increasingly dominated by the nitrite+nitrate load (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The % nitrite+nitrate load of the total nitrogen load for May in the main channel of the Mississippi River. The estimates are from the USGS.



Hypoxic Zone Size

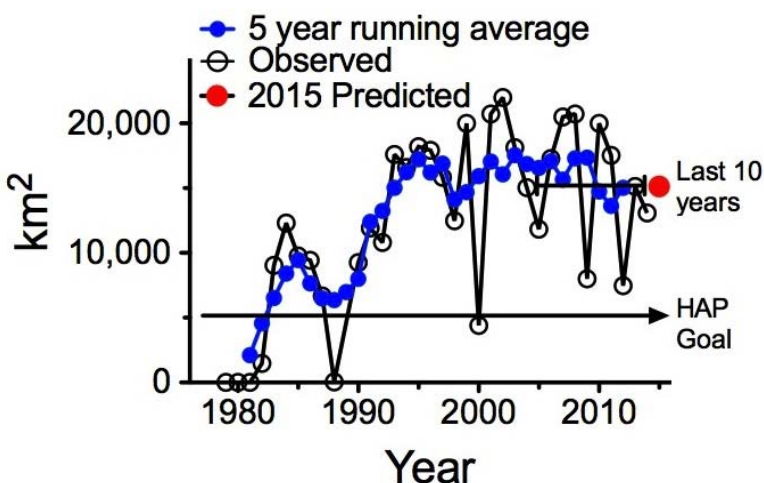
Models for predicting the size of the hypoxic zone size rely on July cruise data primarily because there are no comparable shelfwide data for other months. Data on the size of the hypoxic zone in late July from 1985 to 2014 are based on annual field measurements (data available at <http://www.gulfhypoxia.net>). The 2015 mapping cruise is scheduled for late July and the data will be posted daily at the same web site. The values for 1989 (no funding available) and 1978-1984 are estimated from contemporary field data. The estimates for before 1978 assume that there was no significant hypoxia then and are based on results from various models. Data for five years were not included in the analysis because there were strong storms just before or during the cruise (1998, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011 and 2013). These storms, by comparison of pre-cruise and post-cruise sampling to data collected during the cruise, changed currents, disrupted the stratified water column, and re-aerated the water column. It may take a few days to several weeks, depending on water temperature and initial dissolved oxygen concentration, for respiration to reduce the dissolved oxygen concentration to $\leq 2 \text{ mg l}^{-1}$ after the water column stratification is re-established. The average reduction in hypoxia size in years with storms compared to years without storms is $70 \pm 9\%$.

Prediction for 2015

We used several models to forecast the hypoxic zone in the northern Gulf of Mexico in July 2015. The most accurate model prediction, we think, is that it will cover $15,121 \text{ km}^2$ ($5,838 \text{ mi}^2$) of the bottom of the continental shelf off Louisiana and Texas in 2015. The 95% confidence interval is that it will be between $12,978$ and $16,879 \text{ km}^2$ ($5,011$ and $6,517 \text{ mi}^2$) (Figure 7). This

estimate is based on the assumption that there are no significant tropical storms occurring in the two weeks before the monitoring cruise, or during the cruise. If a storm does occur, then the size of the zone is predicted to be 70% of the predicted size without the storm, equivalent to 10,584 km² (4,087 mi²). This is essentially the same size as in 2014, and slightly higher than the 5-year running average of 14,640 km².

Figure 7. The measured and estimated size of the hypoxic zone from 1979 to 2014 and the predicted size for 2015.



Hypoxia Models and Model Accuracy

Models are used to summarize information, to test assumptions and to make predictions that may be useful for other purposes, including management. There are multiple models of the size of the hypoxic zone that are useful in evaluating the influence of nitrogen load and variations in ocean currents, climate, etc. These models do not always produce similar results, and model improvement is one focus of ongoing research efforts supported by the NOAA Center for Sponsored Coastal Ocean Research.

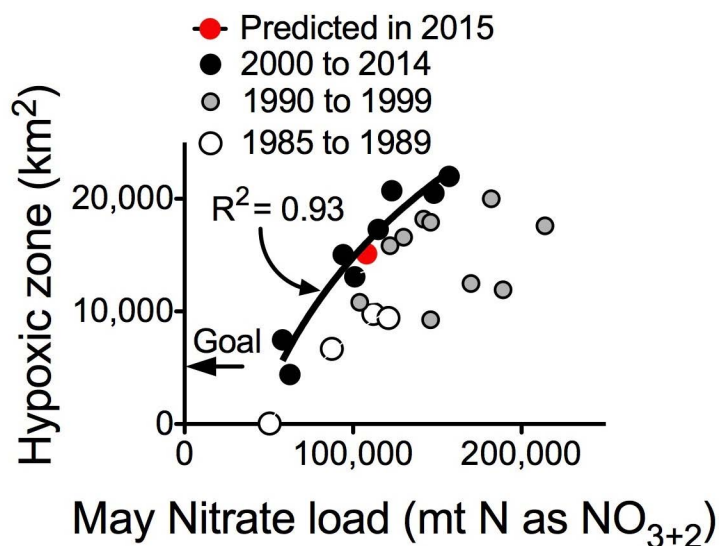
The various statistical models we use to predict the size of the hypoxic zone in July are based on the May total nitrite+nitrate nitrogen load to the Gulf from the main stem of the Mississippi River and the Atchafalaya River. The residence time of the surface waters along this coast is about 2 to 3 months in the summer, hence the 2 to 3 month lag between the loading rate calculated in May and the size of the hypoxic zone in late July. The stability of these models, however, is not fixed, because the ecosystem is evolving. For example, the size of the hypoxic zone for the same amount of nitrogen loading (as nitrite+nitrate) increases each year (Turner et al. 2008, 2012). Further, the models will eventually be adjusted to account for the limited space on the shelf for hypoxia to occur (a physiographic constraint).

We use several models to predict the size of the hypoxic zone. All of them use the nutrient loading from the Mississippi River in May, which is 2 to 3 months before the annual summer hypoxia cruise that maps its areal extent (note: concentration \times discharge equals the nitrite-nitrate load). The unstated hypothesis implied by these models is that the system can be treated as a chemostat limited by N, in the same way that the chlorophyll *a* concentration or algal biomass in lakes might be modeled by P loading to the lake. The Streeter–Phelps inspired models initiated by Scavia and colleagues also incorporate this nutrient dose:response framework (Scavia et al. 2003, 2004; Scavia and Donnelly 2007) in their predictive schemes.

The model used assumes that the size of the zone is driven mostly by what happens this year and that other influences cause variation around a relatively stable baseline suite of factors. An example of secondary influences might be seasonal or annual variations in wind speed and direction or freshwater volume. This model is based on the nitrate load of the current year. The reference point for calibrating the model is the behavior of the system in recent history. We use the last seven years of data on the relationship between hypoxic zone size and nutrient loading for this model. Others do something similar. The USGS uses the last five years of data to calibrate the ‘LOADSET’ model, for example, and Scavia and Donnelly (2007) update the coefficients in their model annually by using rolling 3 to 5 year averages for coefficients (Evans and Scavia 2010). Their recent numerical adaptation has the effect of adjusting model input with each year, but not explaining the biological/physical basis for these changes any better than our model does with the year term. The year term in this model is, in other words, descriptive, but not explanatory beyond the simple nitrogen loading = oxygen deficit relationship.

The results of our model are in Figure 8. The nitrate data were transformed into their log10 equivalents to avoid the problem encountered in 2012 when the prediction was much larger than the actual size, which is attributable to using a simple linear regression analysis to fit a curvilinear relationship. If there is significant curvature (bowed upward) without this transformation, then both the lower and upper ends of the data field are overestimated. This effect is more dramatic when the relationship is being extended into a sparse data field at the extremes of nitrogen loading, as happened during 2012, which was a drought (and low nitrate loading). The estimate for 2015 overlaps the calibration curve ($R^2 = 0.98$; Figure 8).

Figure 8. The relationship between nitrate+nitrate loading in May and the size of the hypoxic zone in July. Several intervals are broken out, with the last one (2000 to 2014) being fit to a linear regression model. The predicted size of the hypoxic zone for 2015 is indicated with the red dot (with a 95% confidence interval).



Some of the sensitivity to nitrate loading is carried over from one interval to the next. We call these effects ‘legacy’ effects, and they may last decades. A legacy effect can be explained as the result of incremental changes in organic matter accumulated in the sediments one year, and metabolized in later years (Turner and Rabalais 1994), by changes in the percent nitrate of the total nitrogen pool (e.g., Figure 6), or by long-term climate change.

A similar calculation for the predicted volume of hypoxia is based on the relationship between hypoxia area and volume (Figure 9). The predicted volume of the hypoxic zone for 2015 is 43.4 km³

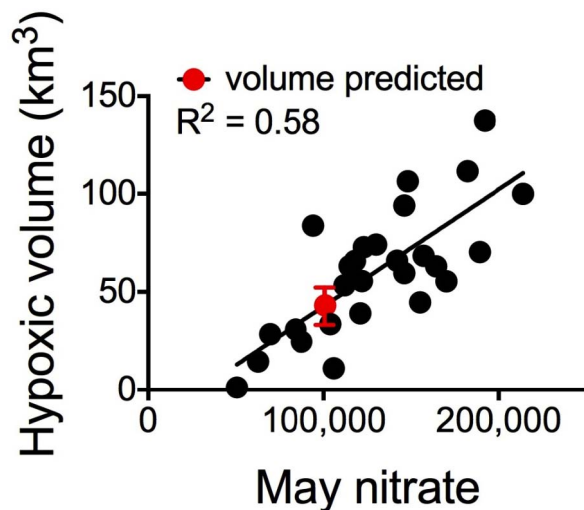


Figure 9. The relationship between nitrate+nitrate loading in May and the volume of the hypoxic zones from 1985 to 2011. The volume data are from Obenour et al. (2013). The predicted size of the hypoxic zone for 2015 is indicated with the red dot (with a 95% confidence interval.)

The statistical models used here, and their predecessors, are fairly accurate models based on past performance (Turner et al. 2008, 2012). The predictions in 2006, 2007, and 2010, for example, were 99%, 107%, and 99%, respectively, of the measured size. The model used here describes 93% of the variation since 2000 (inclusive; Figure 8). The equivalent model for the Baltic Sea low oxygen conditions explains 49 to 52% of the variation in the interannual variation in bottom water oxygen concentration (Conley et al. 2007).

Nutrient load models are robust for long-term management purposes, but they are less robust when short-term weather patterns move water masses or mix up the water column. The size of the hypoxic zone this year is expected to follow the relationship with nitrogen loading—as long as there is no ‘wildcard’ in the form of a tropical storm at the time of the annual summer cruise. Some of the variation in the size of the Gulf hypoxic zone, for example, is due to re-aeration of the water column during storms. The size of the summer hypoxic zone in 2008, for example, was less than predicted because of the influence of Hurricane Dolly. Tropical Storm Don was a similar complication in 2011. The long-term trend, however, is that the area of hypoxia is larger for the same amount of nitrogen loading (Turner et al. 2008, 2012; Figure 8).

The low dissolved oxygen in the bottom waters also increases when sustained and strong winds move oxygen from the surface to the bottom. After the stronger winds, calm winds will allow the physical stratification of the water column to return leading to a reduction in oxygen through respiration that is not restored by mixing of higher oxygen water from the surface to the bottom.

Other models that also predict oxygen dynamics on this shelf are discussed in Bierman et al. (1994), Justić et al. (2003), Scavia and Donnelly (2007), Forest et al. (2011), Kling et al. 2014, and Scavia et al. (2003, 2004). The University of Michigan forecast site is located at: <http://www.sitemaker.umich.edu/scavia>.

The data from this year's cruise will be used to quantify the relative merits of the assumptions of the two models, and to compare them with other models of various kinds. This is an example of how long-term observations are one of the best ways to test and calibrate ecosystem models, to recognize the dynamic nature of our changing environment(s), and to improve the basis for sound management decisions.

Post-cruise Assessment

A post-cruise assessment will be made at the end of the summer shelfwide hypoxia cruise and posted on the same website where this report appears (<http://www.gulfhypoxia.net>).

Acknowledgments

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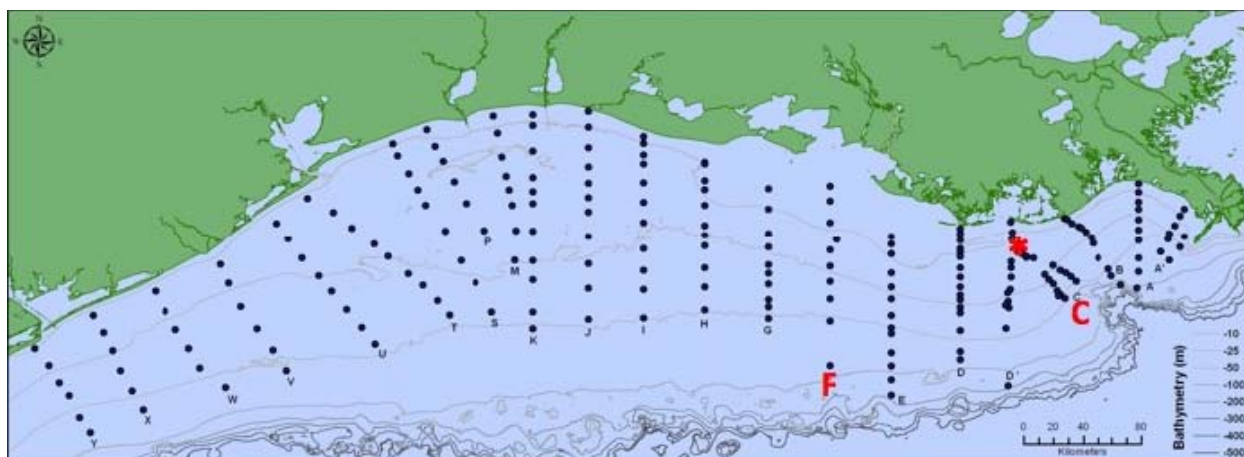
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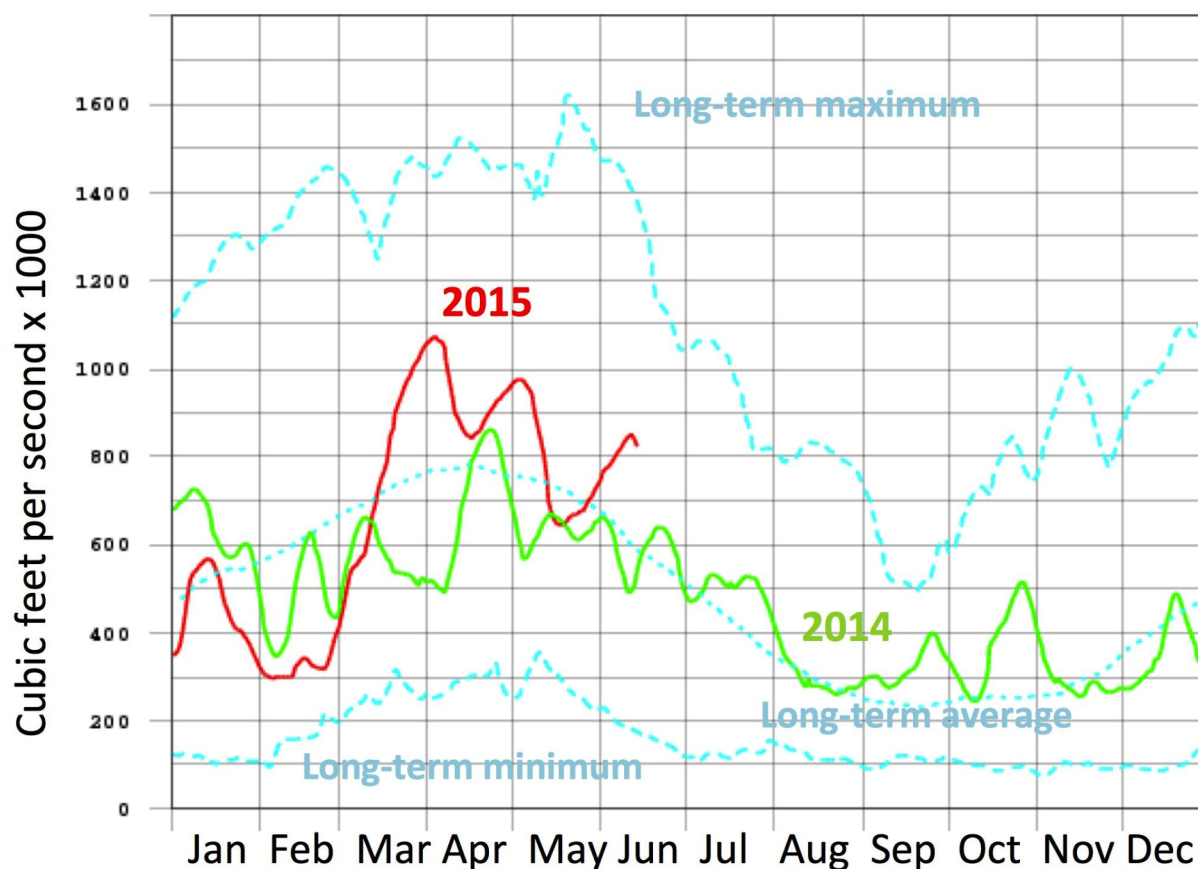
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Appendix



Appendix Figure 1. Location of hypoxia monitoring stations sampled in summer, the transects off Terrebonne Bay (transect C) and Atchafalaya Bay (transect F), and the ocean observing system (asterisk) off Terrebonne Bay.



Appendix Figure 2. The daily river discharge at Tarbert Landing from 1935 through 14 Jun 2015. Units are cubic feet per second \times 1000. Figure modified from <http://rivergages.mvr.usace.army.mil/WaterControl/Districts/MVN/tar.gif>