

2025

A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY TO COORDINATE NUTRIENT LOSS REDUCTION EFFORTS IN THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER BASIN



**Developed by Southern Extension and Research
Activities committee number 46 (SERA-46)**

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STRATEGY PURPOSE

The purpose of this strategy is to provide shared communications guidance that can improve the coordination of efforts to reduce nutrient loss in the Mississippi and Atchafalaya River Basin and shrink the hypoxic zone of the Gulf of America.

The Southern Extension and Research Activities committee number 46 (SERA-46) is the owner and curator of this strategy. SERA-46 consists of researchers and Extension staff from each land grant university in the 12 mainstem Mississippi and Atchafalaya River Basin states. The committee's official title is "The Framework for Nutrient Reduction Strategy Collaboration: The Role for Land-Grant Universities." It is funded by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) to promote multi-state research and extension activities that help mitigate nutrient loss from agricultural lands and hypoxia in the Gulf. Financial support to develop and implement this strategy was provided by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Gulf Hypoxia Program.

In addition to SERA-46, users of this strategy include but are not limited to the Hypoxia Task Force and Coordinating Committee, sub-basin committees, and other key partners and stakeholders who work on state nutrient loss reduction strategies. This strategy is not intended to replace individual organizations' existing communications strategies, but aims to help bring cohesion to coordinated communications across the Basin.



COMMUNICATION GOALS

This communications strategy is in service of achieving the following goals:



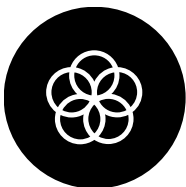
Goal 1

Increase understanding of the challenges to achieving Hypoxia Task Force goals to establish pragmatic expectations around the pace of progress and the financial and technical needs for making progress.



Goal 2

Encourage greater adoption of conservation practices on agricultural, suburban, and urban landscapes in the Mississippi and Atchafalaya River Basin states through networks and resources to advance nonpoint source reductions.



Goal 3

Foster support for continued investment in state nutrient loss reduction strategies and for coordinated actions to meet shared goals for the Basin and Gulf.

TARGET AUDIENCES

This communications strategy is designed to reach and motivate the following target audiences. In some cases, the audiences are also the users of this strategy. Given that this is a living document, additional target audiences may be added in the future.

Audience Segment	Their role in meeting Hypoxia Task Force goals
State and federal elected officials	Coordinate funding and technical resources related to the Hypoxia Task Force and state-level nutrient loss reduction strategies.
State natural resources and agriculture agencies	Affect state policies and incentives to advance nutrient loss reduction measures and goals.
Researchers in universities, industry, and federal agencies	Develop and refine scientific understandings that can support or enhance efforts to achieve nutrient loss reduction goals.
Agricultural producers, landowners, and advisors	Make decisions and take actions that directly affect local water quality and best management practice implementation trends.

Audience Segment	Their role in meeting Hypoxia Task Force goals
National and state farmer and commodity groups	Represent and influence the perspectives and decisions of agricultural producers.
Engaged non-governmental organizations (NGOs)	Influence local, state, and national policies and actions that directly affect water quality.
Conservation and Extension professionals	Support agricultural producers in implementing conservation practices at the local level.
Private agricultural supply chain entities	Influence and incentivize the adoption of conservation practices.
Permit holders	Have the opportunity to work with their states on their nutrient loss reduction strategies.
Journalists	Influence public narrative and opinions around the Gulf and Hypoxia Task Force goals.
Philanthropic organizations	Develop funding priorities and provide funding support that can influence Basin-wide outcomes.

KEY MESSAGES



Photo credit: Catherine DeLong

The following messages can inform the communications efforts of this strategy's users and potential messengers, which may include target audiences. The messages have multiple uses, including to reinforce the value of what users are doing, make users' voices and efforts consistent with basin-wide priorities and efforts, shape public narrative and opinion, and promote state nutrient loss reduction strategies for funding support.

These messages are meant to guide communication efforts and are not necessarily meant to be used verbatim. In most cases, messages will need to be tailored to specific audiences.

GOAL 1 KEY MESSAGES

Goal 1: Increase understanding of the challenges to achieving Hypoxia Task Force goals to establish pragmatic expectations around the pace of progress and the financial and technical needs for making progress.

Key audiences for this goal:

- State and federal elected officials
- Engaged NGOs
- Journalists
- Agricultural producers, landowners, and advisors
- Farmer and commodity groups
- Researchers

1

The Gulf hypoxic zone is the largest in the United States, and the Mississippi River Basin is the largest river system in the United States. Progress towards the Hypoxia Task Force goals will take decades.

Tip: Consider using another long-term, a-political mission as a comparison – e.g., the moonshot mission or ozone layer depletion.

2

Reaching the goals stated in the Gulf Hypoxia Action Plan will require a significant commitment of resources and human and social capital.

Supportive sub-message: The investment of funding, resources, and human capital to address Gulf hypoxia must be commensurate with the effort necessary.

3

Gulf hypoxia is a complex problem to solve because nutrient loss has many sources and can have a long legacy, which creates lags in measurable progress.

Supportive sub-message: It took a long time for the problem to emerge, and it will take a long time to fix it.

4

The impacts of changing climate patterns increase the complexity of reducing Gulf hypoxia.

Supportive sub-message: More extreme weather events are causing drought or floods that impact water quantity, which influences nutrient loads to the system. This flow variability further impacts progress.

5

Improving consistency in water quality data collection and analysis across the monitoring network within the Basin would give us a better grasp of the full scale of the problem and needs for making progress. This will require time and resources.

6

There are approaches that can help us adapt to nutrient lags and climate variability, and greater investment in their implementation is necessary to accelerate progress at scale.

Tip: Provide concrete examples, such as nature-based solutions, floodplain reconnection, reestablishing greenways, conservation on working lands.

7

Little changes add up and, over time, collective efforts can repair the system.

Tip: The “system” may depend on the context – e.g., the watershed, the agricultural system, aquatic ecosystems, etc.

8

Environmental, political, and social conditions are constantly changing. Meeting financial and technical needs will require flexibility.

GOAL 2 KEY MESSAGES

Goal 2: Encourage greater adoption of conservation practices on agricultural, suburban, and urban landscapes in the Mississippi and Atchafalaya River Basin states through networks and resources to advance nonpoint source reductions.

Key audiences for this goal:

- Agricultural producers, landowners, and advisors
- Farmer and commodity groups
- Conservation and Extension professionals
- Private agricultural supply chain entities
- Permit holders

1

The solutions to reduce nutrient loss have multiple benefits, including warding off negative impacts of a changing climate/intensifying weather patterns.

Tip: Highlight specific local benefits to individuals and communities, especially small and rural communities.

2

Solutions are locally driven and have local benefits.

Supportive sub-message: Local actions can make a difference locally and, sometimes, immediately.

3

Implementing conservation practices builds economic resilience. Investing in improvements to soil resources and farmland protects the next generation of farming communities.

Tip: Consider using specific examples about the costs and/or economic benefits of practices. Examples:

- Lost nitrogen/phosphorus is lost money.
- Implementing cover crops and/or no-till can, over time, reduce input costs.

4

Reducing Gulf hypoxia is a collective effort. We must work together – across urban and rural sectors – and each do our fair share to mitigate the negative impacts of nutrient runoff.

5

You're not in this alone; people and resources are available to help with practice implementation.



GOAL 3 KEY MESSAGES

Goal 3: Foster support for continued investment in state nutrient loss reduction strategies and for coordinated actions to meet shared goals for the Basin and Gulf.

Key audiences for this goal:

- State and federal elected officials
- State natural resources and agriculture agencies
- Engaged NGOs
- Permit holders
- Journalists
- Philanthropic organizations

1

It is time to reinforce and expand coordination among federal, state, and private partners to achieve the Hypoxia Task Force goals.

Supportive sub-message: The complexity of the problem demands a coordinated effort.

2

The Hypoxia Task Force is a model of “cooperative federalism” – i.e., successful local, state, and federal partnerships – where states lead the development and implementation of nutrient loss reduction strategies and federal agencies provide support.

Supportive sub-message: While the Gulf Hypoxia Action Plan goals were initially agreed upon in 2001*, directed federal funding backing efforts to achieve these goals – i.e., the Gulf Hypoxia Program – did not start until 2022, two decades later.

Supportive sub-message: Initial results of the Gulf Hypoxia Program show public engagement strategies can help advance progress and state programs are scalable.

*The Hypoxia Task Force is currently implementing the 2008 Gulf Hypoxia Action Plan and 2015 goal to reduce the five-year running average areal extent of the Gulf hypoxic zone to less than 5,000 square kilometers.

3

Investing in nutrient loss reduction efforts in the Basin is an investment in the long-term vitality and resilience of rural economies, communities, and landscapes.

4

It's not just about reducing the dead zone in the Gulf. It's about economic vitality, food and water security, ecosystem health, and mitigating risks to local communities across the Basin.

Tip: Use specific examples of local impacts and concerns, tailored to the audience and context.

5

The scope of the benefits of action is broad. There are benefits from family farms to coastal fisheries and everything in between.

Tip: Use specific examples of benefits, tailored to the audience and context.

6

There is opportunity to allocate resources effectively and efficiently, instead of in fragmented efforts.

Tip: Provide examples of “how” to allocate resources – e.g., public-private partnerships.

7

A network of federal, state, and private funders will be critical to success.

8

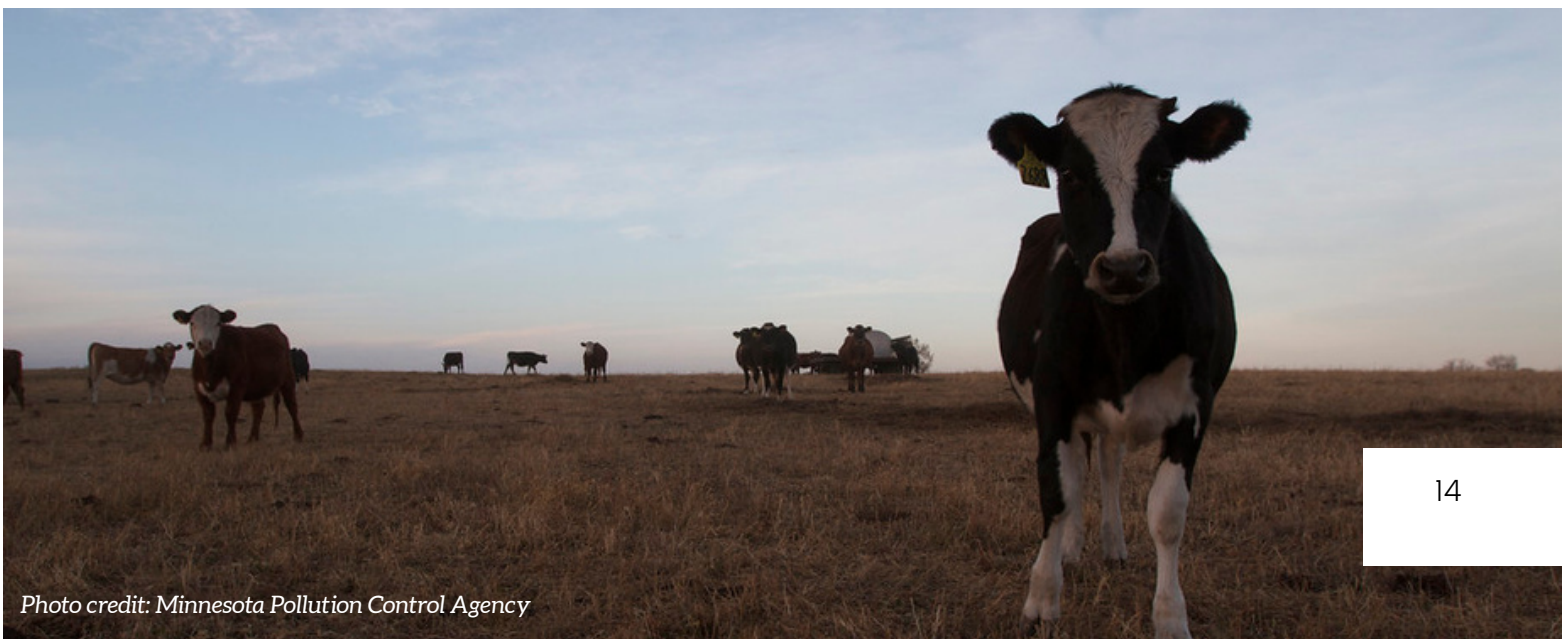
Programs need to encourage more local adoption of agricultural conservation and stormwater management practices, allocate funds for nature-based solutions, and maintain realistic expectations of the timeline to achieving interim targets.

Supportive sub-message: There are multiple ways to achieve the Hypoxia Task Force goals, and states are picking pathways that make sense for them.

9

When the funding comes, state nutrient loss reduction strategies are ready for implementation. States can choose from a variety of science-based conservation practices based on local needs.

Supportive sub-message: The Hypoxia Task Force and its longstanding partnerships [with state and federal agencies, Tribes, and other stakeholders] are a great vehicle for supporting coordinated efforts.



TARGET OUTCOMES



Photo credit: Jenny Seifert

Short-term Outcomes

- Greater understanding among audiences about the challenges and complexity of addressing Gulf hypoxia and how they can influence long-term goals.
- Increased awareness of the variety of actors/audiences/resources that are engaged in nutrient loss reduction in the Basin.
- Strengthened network of audiences engaged in nutrient loss reduction.
- Audiences can more easily access resources and tools to support conservation practice adoption and coordinated actions.



Photo credit: NRCS/SWCS photo by Lynn Betts

Medium-term Outcomes

- Public expectations about the pace of progress align better with the challenges of and needs for making progress.
- Increased adoption of conservation practices on the landscape.
- Improved engagement and coordination among audiences to work toward long-term goals.
- Support/funding/awareness for nutrient loss reduction that is commensurate with the problem.

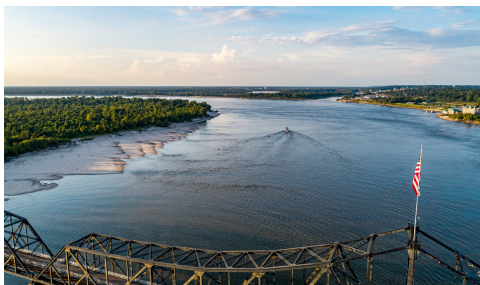


Photo credit: Justin Wilkens/Unsplash

Long-term Outcomes

- Sustained understanding and acceptance among target audiences about the pace of progress.
- Accepted norm for how to address nutrient runoff, based on better understanding of the science of hypoxia and nutrient management.
- Efforts to achieve Hypoxia Task Force goals for the Gulf hypoxic zone are successful.

TACTICS

Tactics in support of this strategy will depend on 1) the roles and capacities of the user facilitating the communications, 2) which goal the effort will serve, and 3) the specific audience's needs and preferences. Users should identify their priority audiences and pursue tactics that will reach those audiences.

Potential Coordinated Tactics

Users of this strategy could consider coordinating tactics to reach the following high-reach and/or high-impact audiences, as potentially influential messengers, champions, and decision-makers who may need more attention, at least initially.

Journalists

Goal: To enable better informed reporting that supports pragmatic public expectations of progress and needs. Example tactics include but are not limited to the following:

- Webinar series
- Partnering with relevant outlets on stories
- Field tours

Engaged NGOs

Goal: To support coordinated efforts and inform advocacy with key messages and exemplary stories. Example tactics include but are not limited to the following:

- Webinar series
- Messaging guide that can be used in advocacy and outreach
- Social media, newsletter, or blog partnerships to amplify messages and stories

State and federal elected officials

Goal: To inform funding and/or policy decisions that can support coordinated efforts. Example tactics include but are not limited to the following:

- Issue briefs
- Field tours

Partnerships Are Critical

Strong partnerships will be critical to achieving communication goals. This strategy aims to be supportive of new and existing collaborative communication efforts based on aligned goals, with an intent to help build bridges between, rather than duplicate efforts.

Potential Tactics for SERA-46

Given the role land grant universities play in advancing nutrient loss reduction in the Basin – i.e., research and science-informed outreach and education – SERA-46 is considering undertaking tactics among the following over the next four years:

Tactic	Target Audience(s)
“Boot camp” on the state of the science and solutions to address Gulf Hypoxia	Journalists
Toolkit on the state of the science and solutions	Journalists, NGOs
Pitch topics to established relevant informational outlets to promote strategic messaging	Various, depending on the outlet
Toolkit and/or webinar(s) on integrating messaging and target audiences into relevant events	Conservation and Extension professionals
Work with stakeholders to integrate key messages into relevant state-level campaigns	Various, depending on the campaign
Sustain and grow <u>One Good Idea</u> to support farmers’ adoption of conservation practices	Agricultural producers, landowners, and advisors
Sustain and grow <u>The Confluence for Watershed Leaders</u> to increase human capital for coordinated efforts	Conservation and Extension professionals

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The following metrics, as measured among our target audiences, could indicate the success of this strategy:

Metric	Potential Measurement Approach
Completion of the tactics outlined in this strategy	Work plan and annual assessment
Reach of communications tactics	• Participation/registration records • Media coverage • Social media listening (awareness/sentiment)
Perceptions about the pace of progress	Audience survey - potentially pre/post surveys to measure change in awareness and attitudes over time
Attitudes about the Hypoxia Task Force goals	Audience survey and/or analysis of public comments at Hypoxia Task Force meetings
Number of active participants and collaborations within the stakeholder network	Social network analysis
Perceptions of belonging to a network related to nutrient loss reduction in the Basin	Audience survey
Funding allocated to nutrient loss reduction efforts in Basin states	Analysis of public records on funding programs

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- Jenny Seifert, University of Wisconsin—Madison (lead)
- Ken Genskow, University of Wisconsin—Madison
- Amanda Gumbert, University of Kentucky
- M.P. Hayes, Louisiana State University
- Bin Peng, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

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Contact

Please direct questions or feedback to:

Jenny Seifert

Watershed Outreach Specialist

University of Wisconsin—Madison Division of Extension

jenny.seifert@wisc.edu