

Testimony of  
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On behalf of the  
Mississippi Department of Marine Resources  
Before the U.S. House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on Fisheries and Oceans

On

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Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify before you on the devastating effects that Hurricane Katrina thrust upon Mississippi and its marine resources. I am Corky Perret, Director of the Office of Marine Fisheries with the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources (MDMR).

Congress has a long history of responding to natural disasters. In recent years our state has received funding relief following Hurricanes Andrew and Ivan that aided greatly in the rebuilding of natural resources. I want to use this opportunity to thank the Congress for its help in the past.

Hurricane Katrina dealt a catastrophic blow to much of the beautiful Mississippi Gulf Coast and its highly productive coastal marshes and estuaries. For twelve hours, the entire coastline was subjected to the most damaging northeast quadrant of this category 4 storm, with high winds and a storm surge which ranged from 15 to 35 ft. Prior to Hurricane Katrina the MS Gulf Coast was blessed with valuable renewable marine resources and the infrastructure necessary for supporting the commercial, charter boat and recreational user groups that benefited from those resources. The total economic impact of Mississippi's commercial seafood industry in 2003 was over \$900 million and employed nearly 17,000 people. Mississippi's recreational fishermen took over one million trips in 2004 and had an economic impact of \$170 million.

The loss of fish and shellfish nursery habitat resulting from Hurricane Katrina and loss of fisheries related jobs and fisheries infrastructure, boat dockage, public access, seafood processing capacity, etc., will adversely impact the area and state economy for many years.

The main office of the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources is located adjacent to Biloxi Bay in the six story Bolton State Office Building. About one half of MDMR's employees occupied the first floor which was flooded with over 9 feet of water that extended into the ceiling and caused damage to the structure and destroyed the equipment inside. Many reports, documents, records and files were damaged or destroyed beyond use. Much work will have to be conducted to restore data and recreate reports. The entire building has been unusable since the hurricane and all one hundred and forty-one MDMR employees have been operating out of 3 double wide portable office buildings and using 4 portable toilets. Many of the department's employees have lost their homes and all employees have been impacted by the inconveniences thrust upon us by Hurricane Katrina. The Department's total loss is in excess of \$ 4 million. To date the department has received very little in federal aid that is in response to damages to our facilities and very little federal aid for marine fisheries issues. Considering the scope of damages and the human suffering that is involved, I feel that, the federal agencies response to rebuild infrastructure and restore damaged marine resources to date, has been painfully slow and woefully inadequate.

#### HURRICANE KATRINA'S EFFECT ON FISHERIES HABITATS

Katrina's storm surge permanently changed the shape of the coastline and barrier islands, damaging valuable marine fisheries habitat. Large areas of marsh, seagrass, oyster reef and artificial reefs were lost or heavily impacted. Estimated tidal marsh loss exceeds thirteen hundred acres. These losses are mostly from debris fields, deposited by the storm surge that buried the marsh. Acreage lost to coastal erosion from the hurricane needs to be further evaluated. Observers inspected seagrass beds from a helicopter and estimated only 10 percent of the 3000 acres that existed in 1999 remain. Seagrass beds are a very important juvenile habitat for a variety of aquatic species.

The maritime forest along the gulf coast was particularly hard hit. Many trees were uprooted or killed by high winds and saltwater intrusion. The loss of this upland habitat will increase sediment runoff, increasing turbidity, which will affect

estuarine habitats and the species that inhabit them.

Marine debris from Hurricane Katrina which is abundant in coastal bayous, rivers, bays and the Mississippi Sound is a major problem. We have everything imaginable in the water (buildings, cars, trees and all types of land items). It has been 7 months since Hurricane Katrina and there has been no significant effort to remove debris from any state waters. Mississippi's shrimp season historically starts in the second week of June. It is doubtful that any of the states shrimping grounds will be cleaned prior to the opening. This will cause additional hardship on Mississippi's already devastated remaining shrimp fleet. This debris will cause major safety and economic concerns for shrimpers and the boating public, making navigation and deployment of fishing gear dangerous and time consuming. Again the federal response has been slow and inadequate.

## Artificial Reef Habitat

Seventy-five percent of the 45 nearshore artificial reefs were lost or heavily damaged. Many of these reefs were thriving, growing oyster reefs which were placed in various areas to diversify habitat through the addition of hard substrate. Offshore artificial reefs are currently being evaluated with side scan sonar technology. These artificial reefs previously supported a reef fish fishery valued in excess of \$78 million annually, according to an economic study done by Southwick in 1998. These reefs are developed through the MS Artificial Reef Program and made possible by state, county, federal and private support. Preliminary estimates indicate that about 90 percent of the deployments have subsided into the substrate because of Hurricane Katrina and no longer function as artificial reefs.

## HURRICANE KATRINA'S EFFECT ON FISHERIES RESOURCES

Preliminary information indicates that shrimp, crab and finfish fisheries have not had major adverse affects from Hurricane Katrina, although, large localized fish kills through much of the state were associated with the hurricane. Hurricane Katrina's devastation reduced both the total acreage and function of Mississippi's estuarine and vegetative wetland habitats. Future productivity of Mississippi's fishery resources may be detrimentally impacted, since these habitats are so critical to the life history of these renewable resources.

Preliminary reports indicate that over 90% mortality of marketable oysters occurred over the approximately 12,000 acres of public oyster reefs. Hurricane Katrina killed oysters just about every way that you can imagine, some reefs were buried, some were scoured, some oysters were deposited on unsuitable bottoms and on land, etc. The 2005-06 season appears to be a total loss, providing no income for some 400 commercial oyster fishermen and their families. Major restoration work will need to be done on these reefs , over several years. Very little harvest is anticipated for the next two to three oyster seasons .

## HURRICANE KATRINA'S EFFECTED ON FISHING COMMUNITIES

### Commercial Oyster Fishing Industry

Mississippi 's average landings, based on NMFS data, from 2002 through 2004 was 3,269,789 pounds of meat annually. Dockside value of this catch was \$5.9 million annually. The total economic output (which includes harvesting, processing and distribution) for oysters was approximately \$100 million for 2003. Tragically, 30% to 40% of Mississippi's commercial oyster vessels and over 80% of Mississippi's oyster facilities were severely damaged or destroyed, along with nearly the entire required infrastructure for this valuable industry (e.g. harbors, fuel docks, marine supply facilities, etc.). Mississippi issued 362 commercial oyster licenses in the 2004-2005 fishing season and only 39 to date in the 2005-2006 season. As I indicated earlier, no significant harvest is expected in the next 2 to 3 seasons. This will severely impact people who depend on the oyster resource for their livelihood. Approximately 49% of the oyster fishing fleet assets were damaged or lost estimated at \$7.6 million.

The MDMR conducted a post Hurricane Katrina public oyster reef mapping program with Mississippi commercial oyster fishermen. This program helped to identify the extent of damages to Mississippi's oyster resources and was a much needed source of immediate relief to the fishermen during a time when they would have normally been making a living oystering. A side benefit was that the oyster fishermen had the opportunity to see the extent of the destruction of the reefs first hand. This was one of the most successful and popular programs the DMR has ever conducted. Many of these hard-working fishermen had lost both their homes and vessels. Some of the more fortunate folks were able to live aboard their vessels. One fisherman slept in his truck during the project. The appreciation was openly expressed by several fishermen

in cards to the staff. One Christmas card said: "Thank you for all you have done. This assistance will help me and my family to be able to get back to making a living." Thank you. Signed: Eugene Poole. Another card to one of the ladies on MDMR staff read: "We could not have completed this program if not for you Rita, your mothering, your sternness, and your guidance was necessary to keep all the little boys and their boats on track." Thanks, Signed: The Mississippi Oystermen. From the 1st card it is evident that the oystermen did not view this as work, because they love what they do, but rather, they saw it as a way of helping them out in their time of need. They are not looking for a handout, just a helping hand. They are willing to work hard for their money.

## Commercial Shrimp and Crab Fishing Industry

Prior to Hurricane Katrina shrimp prices were low due to the high volume of imported shrimp sold domestically. At the same time shrimp fishermen were dealing with the raising of fuel prices and the increased cost of operation. Mississippi issued 935 commercial shrimp licenses in the 2004-2005 fishing season. The annual average shrimp landings for the state of MS from 2002 through 2004 was 17,525,792 pounds [heads on]. The dockside value of these landings was \$27.3 million annually, Mississippi's largest fishery by value. Total economic output (includes harvesting, processing and distribution) for the shrimp industry was approximately \$473 million for 2003. Shrimp license sales through February 2006 (license year May 1 through April 30) are down approximately 86% since Katrina. Preliminary estimates from an ongoing post Katrina economic study indicate that approximately 25% of the shrimp fishing fleet assets were lost or damaged, valued at \$17 million. The shrimp live bait industry assets damaged or lost are estimated to be \$4.1 million.

The DMR issued 211 commercial crab licenses during the 2004-2005 license year. Crab harvesting license sales for 2005-2006 have decreased approximately 78% since Katrina made landfall. Mississippi crab harvesters landed 865 thousand pounds of blue crabs with a dockside value of \$705,000 in 2004 with a three year average for the period 2002 through 2004 of 800,842 pounds and a dockside value of \$635,686. Total economic output (includes harvesting, processing and distribution) for crabs is approximately \$9.5 million for 2003. Preliminary estimates of blue crab trap loss range between 75-85 percent. Several of the fishermen that were interviewed removed their traps from the water prior to the storm, only to lose them to the tidal surge. MDMR personnel estimated that nearly 44,000 crab traps were lost or damaged during the storm.

Approximately 49% of the crab harvesting fleet assets were lost or damaged accounting for \$4.1 million.

## Commercial Finfish Fishing Industry

Edible finfish harvesters include 242 commercial hook and line and net (haul seine, cast net, trawl, and gill net) license holders. Annual average landings, 2002 through 2004 were, 2,458,591 pounds; this includes all species of finfish except menhaden. Dockside value of these landings was over \$1 million annually. As in most of our fishing sectors, many of these fishermen live near the coast and their personal properties were heavily impacted by Katrina's storm surge. Approximately 49% of the assets of finfish harvesting fleet (approximately \$5 million) were lost or damaged.

## Menhaden Industry

Mississippi supports a large menhaden fishery, which make up the bulk of the total finfish landings. The menhaden industry lost 3 of its 4 plants in two states and 70 percent of its processing capacity. The Moss Point plant and shipyard in Mississippi employs 340 people and was severely damaged. This production loss will continue to be a problem because of the large amount of debris in the Mississippi Sound. Net damage and fish spills will occur unless areas historically fished in Mississippi are avoided or the debris is removed.

## Charter Vessel Industry

The boat for hire industry has been virtually nonexistent in the months following Katrina. Harbors that berth these vessels and the facilities that provided a point of contact, fuel, bait and ice for this industry were also heavily damaged or totally destroyed. Tourists who make up the bulk of the customers for this industry are currently having difficulties contacting charter vessels and finding overnight accommodations.

Of the 100 licensed charter vessels, 10 are working sporadically at this time. Estimates from survey personnel indicate that charter trips are down 95% from this time last year. Damage to the charter industry exceeds \$2.5 million. Preliminary information suggests that Mississippi has lost nearly 5,000 charter trips with a loss in revenue of approximately \$7.5 million. Revenue loss will continue to climb if the infrastructure supporting charter and tourism industry does not

recover quickly

## Recreational Fishing Industry

As with our other fishing industries the recreational sector has suffered and will continue to suffer because of a lack of supporting infrastructure. Almost all of the public piers utilized by fishermen were totally destroyed or heavily damaged. Preliminary estimates obtained by MDMR personnel, indicate damage to over 9000 linear pier feet that exceeds \$17 million. Harbors that berthed the larger recreational fishing vessels are largely unusable and the associated businesses (live bait dealers) that provide fuel, bait, tackle, and ice are gone. Estimated damage is approximately \$4 million to boat ramps. There are still problems with debris around the ramps and throughout our coastal waters, posing navigational hazards. License sales, although not complete for this license year, are down 41% through February 2006. Estimates from creel survey personnel indicate that fishing effort is down approximately 50%. Approximately 1/3 of the 57,000 recreational vessels on the Mississippi Gulf Coast received damages estimated at \$88 million.

## IMPACTS AFFECTING FISHING INDUSTRY INFRASTRUCTURE

### Commercial Oyster Fishing Industry

Most of Mississippi's seafood dealers and processing facilities received severe damage, ranging from water damage that destroyed refrigeration units and other necessary machinery to complete demolition. Total estimated damages for the 69 processing plants, 141 seafood dealer facilities and 5 land based support facilities of the seafood dealers and processing industry amounted to \$101.3 million, which includes \$77.8 million for processing plants, \$21.3 million for the seafood dealers' facilities and \$2.1 million for the land based support facilities.

For processing plant facilities the average estimated total damages per facility is \$1,127,937.00 and for seafood dealers the average estimated total damages per facility is \$151,157.00. Prior to Hurricane Katrina there were thirty-seven permitted and certified oyster dealers and processors; currently 16 are operational at some level. Presently, there is only one oyster shucker-packer and 5 shellstock shippers, down from 10 and 12 respectively, before the hurricane.

Mississippi fishermen and processors are working with local and state government representatives in pursuing an infrastructure that will once again help supply the nation and the world's demand for Mississippi seafood. Restoration of Mississippi's seafood processing capability will benefit both the future of this industry and restore the priceless cultural and economic heritage of coastal Mississippi.

### Commercial Shrimp and Crab Fishing Industry

As with all of Mississippi's fishing communities, the need to rebuild the infrastructure is vital to the survival of the shrimp and crab fishery. Currently there are only a few seafood dealers buying shrimp and/or crabs, as many dealers are trying to repair or replace damaged facilities. Prior to Hurricane Katrina there were twenty-four certified shrimp dealers and processors; currently fifteen of those are operational at some level. With the majority of the ice houses and fuel docks still out of business, it is difficult for fishermen to secure basic items required to work.

Additionally, fishermen face great risks to their boats and gear due to the extensive amount of debris in the water, particularly located throughout Mississippi's harvest grounds; where no marine debris removal has taken place to date. Recovery from the devastating effects of Katrina requires short-term relief such as allowing fishermen to earn money by cleaning up marine debris. This work would provide dislocated and devastated fishermen, as well as others involved in the fishing industry a temporary source of income and would keep them working on the water. The long-term viability of both of these fisheries is dependant on the rebuilding of existing infrastructure which was destroyed by Katrina.

### Commercial Finfish Fishing Industry

Impacts to the commercial fleet include vessel and fishing gear damage. In addition, Katrina deposited large amounts of debris which will continue to impact these fishermen by damaging fishing gear and reducing fish production. Currently, even if production returned to historic levels there is no infrastructure to support the fishermen. Because almost all of the coastal dealer/processing and harbor facilities have been destroyed, fishermen have no ready access to fuel or ice, no place to unload their catch and no where to dock their vessels.

## FEDERAL DISASTER ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS NEEDING AMENDMENT FOR FISHERMEN TO BE ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE

- Provide fishermen with opportunities to actively participate in restoration and cleanup programs.
- Employ fishermen and their vessels to aid in resource monitoring.
- Fuel replacement for grounded vessels that were re-floated and had their fuel removed during salvage operations.
- Fisheries Stewardship training programs that would help fishermen as a whole take pride in "their" resource and compensation for doing so.
- Additional re-training opportunities for those fishermen that wish to leave the fishery.
- Low interest loans to help replace or repair damaged or destroyed vessels and gear.
- Additional tax relief or tax incentives.
- Increase staff of SBA to handle the large volumes of small business applications for assistance to allow for timelier response.
- Fishermen must have access to fuel, ice, a place to offload and maintenance and repair facilities. Funding is needed to purchase waterfront properties for rebuilding this infrastructure and ensuring waterfront access for these fishermen.
- Gear Loss Compensation Grants to distribute gear (Trawls, TEDs, BIRDS, Crab Traps, Purse Seines, etc.).
- Fuel/Oil vouchers to fishermen for supplementing operating cost.
- Hire fishermen to participate in a voluntary electronic logbook program. This will increase the amount of effort information for various fishery.
- Derelict crab trap clean up; hire licensed crab fishermen to help in the clean-up.

### Summary

In conclusion, the effects of Hurricane Katrina are apparent. The greatest natural disaster in this nation's history left unprecedented devastation to Mississippi's and the Gulf's commercial and recreational fishing industry and their natural and man made infrastructure. It is imperative that federal, state and local government response also be unprecedented if we are to restore and sustain these valuable renewable resources.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the Mississippi seafood industry was very similar to a fine seafood gumbo. A gumbo is a typically southern type of stew usually made in a large pot. A seafood gumbo is one that will have fresh seafood as the "main" ingredients. You can put in all what you want or like: fish, crabs, shrimp, oysters, etc. There are other ingredients that are required to bring it all together: a roux, onions, celery, bell peppers, garlic, chicken stock, sausage, salt, pepper, spices and powdered file leaves or okra. Like a gumbo, Mississippi's seafood industry was comprised of various necessary "ingredients" including boats, captains, crew, dealers, fuel docks, ice houses, marine supply stores, harbors, habitat -- all bubbling together in the large pot of the Mississippi Gulf Coast and coming together to form our very special Mississippi seafood industry gumbo. Without any one of the ingredients, it would not be quite the same. Hurricane Katrina knocked the pot off the stove. Some folks have yet to find the pot. I ask that you help us to make a new pot of gumbo. We have the recipe. The quicker we get all of the ingredients for our "gumbo", the quicker we can serve it.