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COMMERCE SECRETARY DECLARES FAILURE OF LOUISIANA AND MISSISSIPPI BROWN SHRIMP FISHERIES

Secy. Daley Announces $3.5 Million In Aid At Dedication Of Fisheries Research Vessel

Pascagoula, Miss. - Commerce Secretary William M. Daley today announced that $3.5 million in federal funds will be provided to the Gulf states to help restore the Louisiana and Mississippi brown shrimp fisheries damaged by the 1997 Mississippi River floods, and for research to study and predict damaging red tides in the region.

The Commerce Secretary announced the federal aid proposal as he led commissioning activities for the second largest fisheries research ship in the United States during a traditional maritime ceremony and welcomed the vessel into the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration fleet. Named in honor of one of the Gulf region's most eminent marine scientists, the GORDON GUNTER will serve the Southeast Fisheries Science Center of NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service by conducting scientific surveys and collecting data on the health and abundance of fishery resources in the Gulf of Mexico, Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea. The ship's home port will be at the Fisheries Service's Mississippi Laboratories in Pascagoula.

"Up to $2.05 million of the $3.5 million will go directly to Louisiana and Mississippi for activities designed to restore the fisheries and help prevent future such failures while the remainder of the funds will be allocated among the five Gulf states for the research program to study red tides," Daley said. The exact amounts to be awarded to each state will be determined in consultation with the states.

Award of the red tide research funds is contingent on congressional approval of an implementation plan to restore the fisheries.

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The Fisheries Service determined the brown shrimp commercial fishery failure was due to a resource disaster caused by Mississippi River flooding that forced the prolonged flow of large volumes of fresh water into Lake Pontchartrain, La., and the fresh water flooding into Mississippi coastal waters from the opening of Bonnet Carre Spillway as part of the effort to control flooding on the river system. Both events caused the death and displacement of brown shrimp as well as non-commercial marine species.

The agency determined the extremely steep decline in brown shrimp available for harvest constitutes a commercial fishery failure. According to figures from both states, brown shrimp landings in 1997 dropped between 75 - 80 percent compared to recent averages, which caused losses of more than $1 million to fishermen of each state.

The Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission of Gulf Springs, Miss., formally requested the declaration on behalf of the states in October 1997, under Section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. The Fisheries Service proposes to provide up to a total of $2.05 million to Louisiana and Mississippi to address the brown shrimp fishery failure under section 312(a) of the Act.

The Gulf states of Alabama, Texas, Florida, Mississippi and Louisiana also identified the need for research to minimize the effects of red tides. The Fisheries Service determined that the effects of red tide events in the Gulf of Mexico do not constitute a fishery failure as defined under the Magnuson-Stevens Act. However, under section 402(d) of the act, the Department may allocate funds for conducting fisheries related information collection.

Under the implementation plan, Commerce proposes to allocate the remaining funds not directed to the brown shrimp failure among the five Gulf states. The funds will be used for red tide research, including remote monitoring of coastal areas, development of methods to predict outbreaks, field testing, and consumer education. The total package of $3.5 million in federal funding is contingent upon a 25 percent funding match from the states.

Secretary Daley made the announcement during the commissioning ceremony for the recently refurbished fisheries vessel GORDON GUNTER. "This newest addition to the NOAA fleet will provide an important service as the ship conducts environmental research on the living marine resources that help sustain the region's economy," he said.

"We are especially pleased to name the ship after Dr. Gordon Gunter, who has dedicated his life to the study and teaching of marine science in the Gulf region. His pioneering work has substantially increased the scientific body of knowledge, and set the standard for continuing research. This new ship will help the National Marine Fisheries Service and its Mississippi Laboratories ensure that we have a consistent and reliable source of solid data," Daley said.

Joining Secretary Daley at the ceremony was Senator Trent Lott (R-Miss.), who delivered the keynote address. Lott was instrumental in obtaining congressional support for converting the former Navy vessel into a fisheries research vessel. Other speakers included Gordon Gunter, former director of the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory (retired); D. James Baker, Commerce undersecretary for oceans and atmosphere; Rolland Schmitten, director of the National Marine Fisheries Service; and Rear Admiral William Stubblefield, director of the Office of NOAA Corps Operations.

The GORDON GUNTER, operated by NOAA's Office of NOAA Corps Operations as part of the agency's research fleet, will be commanded by Cmdr. Craig McLean, an officer of the NOAA Commissioned Corps, the nation's seventh uniformed service, and crewed by civilian mariners. Scientists coordinating the research aboard the ship will be primarily from the Mississippi Laboratories, with assistance from other government, university, and private sector scientists.

After commissioning, the GORDON GUNTER will conduct a SEAMAP (Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program) ichthyoplankton/marine mammal survey. The ship will deploy plankton nets to collect fish eggs and larvae of commercial and recreational species, as well as observe and monitor marine mammals, particularly whales and porpoises, in the Gulf of Mexico. The ship's acoustically quiet design will make it an excellent platform for the study and observation of marine mammals in the Fisheries Service's Southeast region.

The 224-ft. ship was originally built in 1990 by Halter Marine Inc. of Moss Point, Miss., as the USNS RELENTLESS, a T-AGOS class vessel designed for military purposes. NOAA acquired the ship from the U.S. Navy and converted it to a fisheries research ship. The GORDON GUNTER will replace the NOAA ship CHAPMAN, which was decommissioned last May.

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Office of NOAA Corps Operations and NOAA fleet: http://www.nc.noaa.gov
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