



Mississippi River: An Economic Powerhouse and an Ecological Treasure

The Mississippi River represents a key economic powerhouse and ecological treasure in the United States. More than \$7 billion in agricultural and forest products and \$29 billion in manufactured goods are generated annually in the Mississippi River Valley. Birders, anglers, boaters, hunters and others contribute \$9 billion each year into the economies of the 10 states that border the river. Fifty cities and 18 million people rely on the river for their drinking water.

The Mississippi River is also critical for wildlife. Forty percent of North American waterfowl and 60 percent of the continent's bird species depend on the river as a vital migration corridor. The basin supports 25 percent of all fish species in North America and provides critical habitat for many rare, threatened or endangered native plants and animals.

The Mississippi Alluvial Valley stretches along six southern states and runs approximately 950 miles between Cairo, Illinois, to the Gulf of Mexico. The area, which covers approximately 22 million acres, also serves as a key wildlife habitat area. Experts report that the valley supports approximately 90 species of freshwater fish and that 60 percent of U.S. bird species annually migrate along this corridor.

The partners are optimistic that their projects, as well as the ongoing efforts of both consumers and farmers can better protect the biological integrity of the Mississippi River. With the close proximity of crop production to the Mississippi River and its tributaries, farmers play an important role in efforts to protect the Mississippi and minimize the impact of nutrient runoff into the river and, ultimately, the Gulf of Mexico.

One of the Mississippi's most publicized problems is the impact of nutrient runoff on the Gulf of Mexico. Nitrogen from farms and urban areas throughout the Mississippi watershed moves downstream, contributing to a hypoxic area of low oxygen content commonly referred to as the "dead zone." Excess nitrogen in surface water feeds algae, which then decompose in a process that consumes oxygen in the water to a point where aquatic life cannot be sustained. It's estimated that 39 percent of the nitrogen in the Gulf of Mexico originates from northern areas of the Mississippi River basin.