



STATE OF MISSISSIPPI
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

KIRK FORDICE
GOVERNOR

November 22, 1996

Executive Office of the President
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I would like to take this opportunity to advise you of a disastrous natural occurrence that has recently taken place along our Mississippi Gulf Coast. The disaster I am referencing is the complete closure of all Mississippi oyster beds due to the occurrence of red tide, (*Gymnodinium breve*). Red tide is a toxic alga that can be absorbed by oysters, and people who eat these oysters may become sick. This is the first time that red tide has been documented in Mississippi waters in recent years. Due to the concentrations of this organism in numbers sufficient to cause a public health risk and consistent with the National Shellfish Sanitation Program and U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulations, all of Mississippi shellfish (oyster) growing waters were closed on November 7, 1996. This closure shall remain in effect until the results of water and oyster meat samples are once again at safe levels. It is unknown how long this may be.

To give you an idea of the impact this closure is having, I offer statistics obtained from the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources (MDMR.). Approximately 200 resident oyster harvesters and 100 resident seafood dealer/processor licenses have been issued this year. The Mississippi oyster season opened on October 7 with a daily limit of 12 sacks per day for tongers and 30 sacks per day for dredgers. Indications were that there was an abundance of oysters on our reefs and that it would be an above-average season. Results to date confirm this assessment. Through November 6, 1996, some 78,137 sacks of oysters had been harvested as compared to 32,022 sacks harvested for the same period in 1995. Approximately 175 to 200 boats per day had been fishing on the reefs and most had been getting their daily sack limits. On the day of the closure, (November 7) 3,174 sacks of oysters had been harvested. All of these oysters were recalled by the MDMR to prevent the possibility of oysters contaminated with red tide from reaching the market. This was done at a cost of \$10.00 per sack for these 3,174 sacks harvested. This effort cost the state an estimated \$50,000, and represented a valiant public effort to ensure that potentially harmful oysters not reach the marketplace. It will not, however, begin to compensate the oyster harvesters who are completely out of business nor the oyster dealer/processors whose source of supply has been severely curtailed.

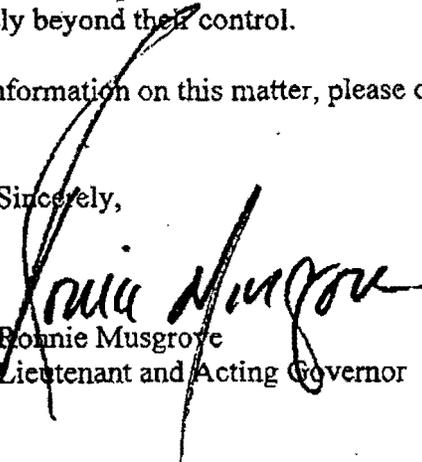
Executive Office of the President
November 22, 1996
Page Two

The magnitude of the economic loss to the oyster industry is yet to be determined as the oyster reefs remain closed to harvest as a result of this red tide. Because Mississippi has not, in recent memory, experienced a toxic red tide bloom, it is difficult to speculate how soon our oyster reefs may be reopened to harvest. If we use the oyster harvest to date (season opened October 7) of 78,137 sacks, divided by the number of open fishing days (27), production was 2,894 sacks per day. At an average price of \$20.00 per sack, the loss to the oyster harvesters alone is \$57,880 per day. This figure, of course, does not take into account the losses dealers and processors are experiencing due to the lack of oysters available for marketing, nor do we have any idea how long this closure will remain in effect, nor the impact the event will have on consumer purchases of oysters once Mississippi's oyster harvesting grounds are reopened. Such losses, when accepted economic multipliers are applied, could range to as high as \$300,000 per day.

It is imperative to provide financial aid to these impacted harvesters and dealers/processors. Therefore, I am asking your assistance. In the past, federal relief has been provided as a result of hurricanes and other natural disasters. The loss that has devastated the Mississippi oyster industry is a continuous, natural disaster of sufficient magnitude to justify federal assistance. I am officially requesting disaster relief under Section 312, Transition to Sustainable Fisheries, of the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, Public Law 94-265, or under the existing declaration of emergency of Fishery Resource Disasters of Section 308(d) of the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act, 16 U.S.C. 4017(d), (as amended), or under any other federally administered program that provides financial relief for natural disasters. It is imperative that these hardworking citizens be compensated for losses caused by this disastrous natural occurrence that is completely beyond their control.

If you should require any additional information on this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,


Bonnie Musgrove
Lieutenant and Acting Governor

cc: Senator Trent Lott
Senator Thad Cochran
Congressman Gene Taylor
Secretary of Commerce
Mr. Rollie Schmitten, Assistant Administrator, NOAA
Mr. E. G. Woods, MDMR
Mr. William S. "Corky" Perret, MDMR
Mr. Jim Maher, MEMA