

animals that still remain in the sediments have to keep breathing. There is not enough oxygen, and eventually they will die off," Rabalais said.

Scientists have been studying the Gulf's dead zone for about 20 years, although its existence has been known for decades. So why is oxygen disappearing from fishing waters in the Gulf of Mexico? The answer, scientists say, is found hundreds of miles to the north, up the Mississippi River in corn country.

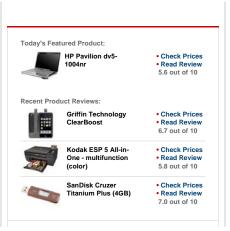
Farmers in lowa and across the Midwest use tons of nitrogen and phosphorous to make their cornfields more productive, which allows the farmers to take advantage of high corn prices resulting from growing demand from ethanol factories and developing countries.

Rain always causes some fertilizer to run off farmland, but this summer's historic flooding caused even more runoff into rivers that flow into the Mississippi.

"That's the primary source of the nutrients that go to the Gulf of Mexico," Rabalais said. "And so the size of the low-oxygen zone has increased in proportion to these nutrients reaching the Gulf."

Fertilizer flowing into the Gulf of Mexico triggers an overgrowth of microscopic algae, which eventually die and fall to the bottom.

"When they die, they decompose, and decomposition requires oxygen," Pride said. "So these things will fall to



So much oxygen is taken from the water that slow-moving sea life like clams, small crabs, starfish and snails suffocate.

"We go diving down there quite frequently," said Melissa Baustain, a doctoral candidate at Louisiana State University. "The deeper we go down in the water, it gets kind of scary, because there's nothing there. There's no fish, there's no organisms alive, so it's just us.

"It's dark, and it's turbid because all that algae that is dying, that's sinking through the water column."

To find lots of shrimp, fishermen like Pizani have to travel to the edge of the dead zone. He calculated that it costs him \$450 a day in diesel fuel to fish.

"You just gotta keep going miles and miles and miles, and hopefully you'll run into something," he said. "The fuel costs are so high, it's just not feasible to get out there unless you can catch a boatload, really make any money out of it."

So, many boats are idle. Others are staying away from their home port in Grand Isle, Louisiana, a disaster for seafood processor Dean Blanchard, who buys shrimp from fishermen.

"All my boats have to go somewhere else to make a living. It's a shame," Blanchard said.

"This is the prime shrimping ground in the country right here, and it shut us down. It just shut us down. It's unreal."

With demand for corn growing, scientists say, the dead zone could expand in coming years.

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