

Congressman Allen Boyd (D-FL) Testimony
The Energy and Environment Subcommittee of the House Committee on Science and
Technology
Hearing on “Harmful Algal Blooms: The Challenges on the Nation’s Coastlines”
July 10, 2008

[AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY]

Chairman Lampson and Ranking Member Inglis:

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this important hearing on Harmful Algal Blooms, such as red tide, and its devastating effects on our nation’s coastlines, including the coastal areas of the Gulf of Mexico, some of which I represent.

I would also like to thank my friend, Mr. Mack, for being a leader on this issue in the Florida Delegation. Cong. Mack has introduced legislation that would better fund important research on red tide, and I hope that this Committee will take a look at that critical bill.

When I was growing up, red tide was a very rare occurrence. However, outbreaks, that were once rare, are becoming more frequent, longer lasting, and severe. In the last 15 to 20 years, the incidence of severe red tide has jumped to at least 4 or 5 outbreaks over that time period.

As those of us in Florida know all too well, the recent, bouts of red tide have adversely affected our economy, our environment, and even our health. Red tide causes respiratory problems in humans and kills fish and manatees. It also contaminates and kills shellfish and destroys coral reef and sea grass communities.

The beautiful, panhandle coastal areas of North Florida along the Gulf of Mexico have been hit especially hard from red tide outbreaks over the years. The 2nd District of Florida, which I represent, is home to some of the most famous and beautiful beaches in the country, such as Panama City Beach, Destin, and Mexico Beach. Anyone who has ever visited North Florida’s Gulf Coast recognizes the importance that we have placed on protecting our beaches and our pristine natural resources. Additionally, our regional economy is reliant on the fishing and seafood industries, such as Port St. Joe’s scallops, and fishing villages, like Apalachicola, with Apalachicola Bay providing 90 percent of the state’s oysters.

Our local economies, our environment, and our very way of life are threatened every time the Algal Blooms near the coastline.

The most recent incidence of Harmful Algal Blooms occurred in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. As you all know, red tide originates out in the Gulf, and hurricanes and storms push it in to the estuaries where the damage to wildlife is severe. One area in my district, Franklin County off of Apalachicola Bay, produces oysters and was hit particularly hard after Hurricane Katrina pushed red tide and its fish-killing toxins to our waters.

The harmful toxins released by these algal blooms have a particularly damaging effect on “filter-feeders.” Filter feeders are fish, such as oysters or scallops, that absorb the waters and filter out the microscopic organisms. If a contaminated filter feeder is eaten, it can cause a person to become very ill.

As Hurricane Katrina pushed the red tide into the Apalachicola Bay, it was trapped in the enclosure of the Bay and slow moving water. The drought at the time – to the north of us in Georgia – only exacerbated an already bad situation. This drought resulted in less freshwater flow to the Apalachicola River, which filters into and ends at the Apalachicola Bay, and the entire area had to be closed because there was not enough freshwater to flush out the algal blooms.

And the damaging effects of red tide are felt not only by the fish. In addition to the rich natural resources that Florida is known for, we are also known as a very popular tourist destination. The toxins released by the blooms can lead to respiratory and eye problems in those who are exposed. It is easy to see how the yearly outbreaks of red tide in the Gulf of Mexico have a direct affect on our \$53 billion dollar tourist industry in Florida.

For example, in the past three years, during the primary months of oyster harvesting – that is September through December – red tides have forced closures of the oyster beds in Apalachicola Bay for well over 50% of the season. The total damages from lost production of seafood, cancelled reservations, regional defamation, and respiratory illnesses exceed the multi-millions each year.

This situation is only expected to worsen with the diminishing flow of freshwaters from the northern reserves that are necessary to maintain Bay water salinity levels that are less favorable to red tides. It is imperative to all of the states around the Gulf of Mexico to learn more about this harmful bloom. We must have a better understanding of where this bloom originates and how we can prevent it from further damaging our environment.

In conclusion, the economic welfare of our coastal communities, seafood commerce, public health, and the livelihood of those who depend on the health of our waters remains vulnerable to increasing occurrences of potentially toxic red tides. The consequences of red tide are known – seafood harvest restrictions, the devaluing of our coastal properties, and less and less people visiting Florida and our beaches. However, what is not known is what causes red tide and how we can fight red tide and ensure that it will not devastate our beautiful coastline or harm our families or economy.

Thank you again for your attention to this issue Mr. Chairman. I stand ready to work with you in whatever way I can, so that we can ultimately develop responsible and effective methods to predict and detect red tide.