

Statement by Congressman Connie Mack
Harmful Algal Blooms: The Challenge on the Nation's Coastlines
House Committee on Science and Technology
Subcommittee on Energy and Environment
Thursday, July 10, 2008

Chairman Lampson and Ranking Member Inglis, I would like to begin by thanking the committee for holding this important hearing. I appreciate the chance to testify on harmful algal blooms (HABs) and how they are affecting our nation's coastlines, oceans, and inland waters. I would also like to thank my friend Mr. Boyd for showing his commitment to this issue. As you all can see this is not a Republican or Democratic matter, rather, it is one that affects the health of our entire nation.

I represent the coastal areas of Southwest Florida. If you haven't been there, it's a beautiful part of the country, with miles and miles of white sandy beaches. Our economy hinges in great part on tourism. People love to come to our shores to fish, to relax on the beach, and to enjoy our unique way of life. For Southwest Florida, like many communities, a healthy environment and a healthy economy go hand in hand.

When I was growing up in Cape Coral, Florida, red tide blooms were short-lived nuisances that lasted just a few days. Today, however, red tide blooms continue for months at a time, and they have drastic and long-lasting implications that threaten the environment, the economy, people's health, and our overall quality of life.

It is imperative that we do more to understand and combat red tide and other harmful algal blooms. From New England to the Great Lakes, from California to South Carolina, these toxic blooms are a national problem that affects us all.

Harmful algal blooms occur when algae produces toxic or harmful effects on people, fish, shellfish, marine mammals, and birds. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), HABs have been reported in almost every coastal state and within the Great Lakes. These blooms cause dangerous respiratory distress, burning eyes, and other ailments to individuals in affected areas, as well as the nationwide potential of severe food poisoning from the consumption of contaminated shellfish.

Harmful algal blooms not only affect our personal health, they also affect the health of our economy. Red tide and other toxic blooms cost approximately \$80 million annually to communities across America. Since HABs are affected by many variables, including weather and currents, it is difficult to predict their

location, timing, or duration. For coastal communities like mine that rely on beaches for tourism, the potential economic losses could be crippling.

Legislation regarding these toxic blooms was first introduced in 1998 under the Harmful Algal Bloom and Hypoxia Research and Control Act of 1998 (HABHRCA). This bill authorized appropriations for NOAA to research, monitor, and manage activities for the prevention and control of HABs. This law established an inter-agency task force to develop a comprehensive coordinated federal response to harmful algal blooms and hypoxia. In addition, the legislation required the task force to submit annual reports to track the progress and effectiveness of the departments and agencies.

The HABHRCA legislation has been reauthorized several times, most recently in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2008. Current law authorizes \$30 million per year for the next three years. Unfortunately, the existing law passed through the appropriations process, and not through your committee. The members of this committee and your staff understand and recognize the importance of this issue. By bringing it up through regular order and holding the hearing today, your committee can finally give this issue the attention it deserves.

Last year I introduced the Save Our Shores Act to increase our commitment to researching HABs, and to improve the process by which those research dollars are accounted for and awarded.

Although existing law incorporates the increased funding levels within my bill, the Save Our Shores Act would reinforce the importance of peer-reviewed research and strengthen the annual reporting requirements.

While NOAA has recognized the importance of having scientists and experts in the field involved in the peer review process to determine where research money is going, Save Our Shores ensures that all HAB funding, not just HABHRCA, would be awarded on a competitive peer reviewed basis. Additionally, by improving reporting requirements Congress and NOAA will be able to measure the effectiveness of these research efforts.

Finally, we need to reduce the gap between authorized and appropriated funds, to ensure research can be continued. Annual funding has fallen far short of authorized levels and we need to close this disparity.

Once again, I commend the committee for bringing up such an important issue. The sooner we can understand what factors may contribute to harmful algal blooms, the sooner solutions can be developed to save our nation's coastlines, oceans, and inland waters.