

By: Jody A. Thompson, Environmental Educator
Alabama Sea Grant/Auburn Marine Center

According to a press release from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, this year the Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico will be the largest on record. Something from a bad horror movie, you ask? Unfortunately, it is real and it affects commercial and recreational fishing in the Gulf.

The Dead Zone generally exists during warmer months in an area of the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Louisiana and Texas. It is called the Dead Zone because the area of water is hypoxic, or lacking in oxygen. Polluted runoff from the Mississippi River watershed, the third largest watershed in the world that drains 41% of the continental U.S., empties nutrients from fertilizers, animal wastes and other chemicals into the Gulf. Algae feeds off the nutrients, creating algal blooms. As the algae dies, decomposition uses the available oxygen in the water. This year, NOAA predicts the Dead Zone could measure 8800 square miles, roughly the size of New Jersey.

You can do your part at home to reduce nutrient inputs into local waterways. Use only the necessary amount of lawn and plant fertilizer for your yard. Contact your County Extension office to inquire about soil testing, so you know exactly what your yard needs. Use native plants that do not require intensive fertilization. Flush pet waste. Wash your car in the yard or at a car wash. Detergents contain phosphorous compounds that degrade water quality.