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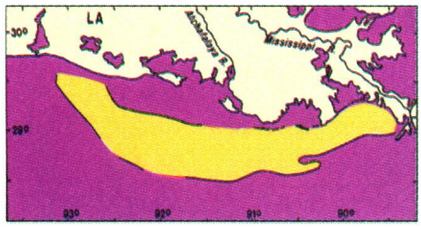

LOUISIANA UNIVS. MARINE CONSORTIUM

Barren sea. Low-oxygen area in the Gulf of Mexico hasn't shrunk much since it grew to 18,000 square kilometers after 1993 floods.

Gulf's 'Dead Zone' Worries Agencies

Washington appears to be waking up to scientists' warnings about what may be one of the country's biggest ecological problems—a vast area of oxygen-depleted, nearly lifeless bottom waters in the Gulf of Mexico. Federal officials are calling for a multiagency study of how to reduce this "dead zone," which could require an environmental plan involving nearly half of the continental United States.

The problem, called hypoxia, is a condition in which seawater contains less than 2 milligrams of dissolved oxygen per liter—too little to sustain much life. Hypoxia occurs when nutrients from sewage and fertilizer runoff in rivers stimulate algal blooms. The algae then sink and decompose, draining oxygen from bottom waters. While hypoxia afflicts coastal areas around the world, scientists became aware of the enormity of the zone near the Mississippi's mouth only in the past 6 years, says coastal ecologist Don Boesch of the University of Maryland. Those studies, sponsored by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), showed that the zone doubled to 18,000 square kilometers in 1993. One result may be "significant effects" on Gulf fisheries, says Boesch.

Researchers have traced the nutrient source to fertilizer runoff from Midwest states. And in August, Environmental Protection Agency Water Office chief Robert Perciasepe brought together officials from several agencies to discuss the problem. Perciasepe has since asked a multiagency White House committee to conduct a 1-year study that would review research on the zone and recommend management steps, such as voluntary reductions in fertilizer use. The officials will meet again on 22 October to consider other actions.

The tough part, says NOAA's Terry Nelson, will be convincing Midwest farmers that they're part of the problem. "Most people don't couple the middle continent and the ocean," he says.

Societies Back Fisher

University of Pittsburgh cancer surgeon Bernard Fisher has gained the support of fellow scientists in his effort to sue the federal government for waging what he calls a "smear campaign" against him. Three groups—the American Society for Microbiology, the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB), and the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges—plan to file a joint amicus curiae brief backing Fisher's suit, which was turned down by a district court in June but is now awaiting review in the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C.

Fisher claims the government injured his reputation 2 years ago when it tagged his papers in electronic databases with labels stating: "Scientific Misconduct." Fisher was director until 1994 of the National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project (NSABP), which got into trouble after a contributing surgeon—Roger Poisson of Montreal—admitted he had faked some patient data. The Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS's) Office of Research Integrity (ORI) is investigating Fisher's handling of NSABP patient records. But even before the results were in, ORI and other agencies put misconduct tags on more than 100 papers co-authored by Fisher in *Medline*, *Cancerlit*, and *Physicians' Data Query*.

In March 1995, Fisher sued HHS, ORI, and the National Institutes of Health for damages, saying his rights under the Privacy Act had been violated. Although District Judge Ricardo M. Urbina ordered the labels removed, they appeared in some databases for another year.

Urbina dismissed Fisher's suit after a hearing on 25 June, but emphasized the need for appeals court review. "This is an area of law that should attract ... the instructive attention of the Court of Appeals," Urbina told lawyers, "because it's not the last time this issue is going to come up."

FASEB is getting involved, says its director, Michael Jackson, because misconduct charges "should be thoroughly investigated and substantiated before they are released to the public." The societies expect to file the amicus brief as soon as the appeals court schedules the case.

Panel Explores Flat-Budget Antarctic Policy

An expert panel convened to review plans by the National Science Foundation (NSF) to renovate the South Pole station has been told to expand its horizons and take a once-in-a-generation look at all U.S. research activity in Antarctica.

NSF created the panel, chaired by Lockheed-Martin CEO Norman Augustine, to examine NSF's options now that an interagency group has recommended that the Antarctic program continue. Last week, at the panel's first meeting, T. J. Glauthier, who oversees science programs for the Office of Management and Budget, told the panel's 11 members that they have a rare opportunity "to chart a strategic vision for the program for the next 20 years." Glauthier asked the panel to review the impact on science of building a new station within a flat, $200 million a year budget, adding that it would need to make "a very compelling case" if it thought more money was needed.

The panel will look at options for saving money, including possibly seeking multinational support for the new station, Augustine said. Members also discussed curtailing research while building the station or extending the target date for completion, now 2005. The panel plans to visit Antarctica before delivering its report in advance of congressional hearings next spring on NSF's proposed 1998 budget.

Hopkins, NIH Plan Shared Genotyping Center

Scientists hoping to pinpoint the genes involved in an inherited disease will soon be able to turn to a new public facility for help, *Science* has learned. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Johns Hopkins University are planning to create a new center accessible to any qualified researcher who needs help sequencing DNA for clinical work, provided a peer review deems the proposal a high priority.

Hopkins is not commenting on the project, which it plans to announce formally in mid-November. But Francis Collins, director of NIH's National Center for Human Genome Research, confirms that his center and seven other NIH institutes are joining with Hopkins to sponsor the genotyping facility—called the Center for Inherited Disease Research (CIDER)—to be located at Hopkins's Bayview medical campus in Baltimore. Collins explains that most researchers don't have access to high-throughput DNA sequencing unless they are part of a genome research center or collaborate with someone else who is. But once CIDER is built, Collins says, any researcher will be able to apply to the center for use of its sequencing services while retaining "complete control of what happens" to the data.

NIH signed the $21.8 million, 5-year contract for CIDER in September. The center is expected to process 2 million to 3 million genotypes per year and may be in operation as early as spring 1997.