

Testimonial letter to NOAA during Hurricane Ida, September 2, 2022

Sean M. Duffy Sr., HSRP Co-chair, and Director, Big River Coalition, sends NOAA his thanks for the emergency assistance for Hurricane Ida for both he and his family as well as the maritime stakeholders and post emergency nautical survey response that helped to reopen the Mississippi River for commerce. He evacuated from Louisiana just prior to the HSRP meeting and provides this thanks to NOAA – to the National Ocean Service (NOS), National Geodetic Survey (NGS), the Center for Operational Oceanographic Products and Services (CO-OPS) and the National Weather Service (NWS) - for their emergency response efforts.

Immediately preceding the start of the HSRP meeting, I utilized detailed weather input provided by NWS to evade Hurricane Ida and dodge the storm's impact. Before, during and after Hurricane Ida the NWS provided detailed weather updates to the maritime professionals and other government agencies united to make critical decisions during coordinated and scheduled teleconference calls to prepare and recover the Mississippi River Ship Channel. These conference calls are frequently enacted across the Gulf of Mexico in response to the ever-increasing number of tropical events and the NWS updates provide real-time weather clarity through scary conditions, key navigation and commercial decisions are made based on this relevant weather input.

After the storm moved inland the same coordination happened across the OCS's team as it deployed Navigation Response Team survey assets in choreographed assignments to do nautical surveys to help reopen the Louisiana ports to shipping. I refer to NOAA as a Swiss Army Knife because of the multiple tools, I paid attention to the added aerial imagery or Emergency Response Imagery from the NGS and this aerial imagery is also coordinated and utilized by agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to focus recovery efforts on critical infrastructure and damaged communities. The day after HSRP, I drove home to begin cleaning up and working on repairs to our home, sleeping outside with my dog several days until our power came back on. I remember one day of picking up limbs and shingles from our roof and a helicopter was flying overhead. A few days later FEMA was at my door with aerial images showing damage to our roof. I guess I knew what the helicopter was doing, but seeing the photos made it clear. The Lower Mississippi River Physical Oceanographic Real-Time System or PORTS® data also served a critical need to provide accurate data, one of the key Air Gap sensors was also knocked offline by Hurricane Ida and I have been trying to assist CO-OPS staff or efforts to recover this critical sensor. The Crescent City Connection is the first or southernmost bridge that crosses the Mississippi River and is key to providing accurate vertical clearance data, after the repair, an industry goal is to have PORTS Air Gap sensors on all six of the bridges that cross over the Mississippi River Ship Channel from Baton Rouge south. Of course, fitting for me that roof repair at home and air gap sensor repair on the Mighty Mississippi are recovery priorities.

The conference call process is based on the input of stakeholder reported intelligence and government agencies working together to safely reestablish maritime commerce while ensuring not to duplicate recovery surveys and needlessly tie up survey assets. I was proud and privileged to know many of the names of NOAA personnel and to hear them cooperatively coordinating and participating. The HSRP was challenging because I had been evacuated and away from my wife and family, but I wanted to express my pride in knowing that I had a Swiss Army Knife of friends and colleagues providing intelligence and working to help restore damaged areas and displaced people. I felt compelled to express my sincere thanks and to share this with you, hard to thank everyone who helped, but NOAA should be proud of the tremendous service and thankless jobs well done under challenging times – all performed during an unprecedented modern pandemic. Thank you for the excellent team work and pride in service.

Sincerely,
Sean M. Duffy, Sr.,
Director, Big River Coalition, and HSRP Co-Chair