



Gulf of Mexico Program


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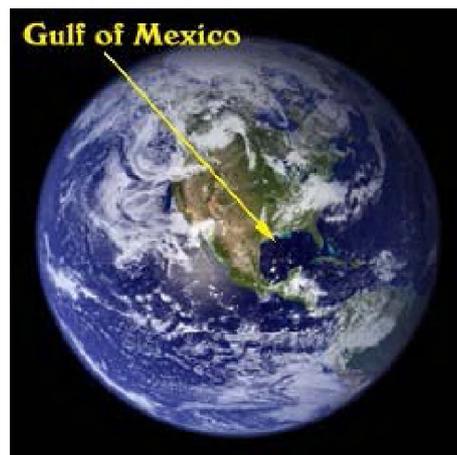
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Location and Size

The Gulf of Mexico, the ninth largest body of water in the world and referred to as the "Mediterranean of the Americas," is located at the southeastern corner of North America. The Gulf is bordered by the United States to the north (Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas), five Mexican states to the west (Tamaulipas, Veracruz, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatan), and the island of Cuba to the southeast.

The Gulf region covers approximately 600,000 square miles, measuring approximately 995 miles from east to west, 560 miles from north to south. The marine shoreline from Cape Sable, Florida to the tip of the Yucatan peninsula extends ~ 3,540 miles, with another 236 miles of shore on the northwest tip of Cuba. The U.S. coastline is approximately 1,631 miles; if bays and other inland waters are included, the total shoreline increases to over 16,000 miles in the U.S. alone.

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Depth

The Gulf of Mexico basin resembles a large pit with a broad shallow rim. Approximately 38% of Gulf waters are shallow intertidal areas. The waters of the continental shelf (<200 m) and continental slope (200-3000 m) represent 22% and 20% respectively, and abyssal areas deeper than 3,000 m comprise the final 20%. Located in the southwestern quadrant, the Sigsbee Deep is the deepest region of the Gulf of Mexico and contains depths of up to 4,384 m. The mean (average) water depth of the Gulf is ~1,615 m and the basin contains a volume of 2,434,000 cubic kilometers of water ($6.43 * 10^{17}$ or 643 quadrillion gallons).

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Age and Formation

It is thought that the Gulf of Mexico formed approximately 300 million years ago. Many theories exist as to the exact mechanism of formation, but most scientists agree that the Gulf was formed as a result of seafloor subsidence.


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Circulation and Currents

Water enters the Gulf through the Yucatan Strait, circulates as the Loop Current, and exits through the Florida Strait eventually forming the Gulf Stream. Portions of the Loop Current often break away forming eddies or 'gyres' which affect regional current patterns. Smaller wind driven and tidal currents are created in nearshore environments. Drainage into the Gulf of Mexico is extensive, covering more than 60% of the United States, and includes outlets from 33 major river systems and 207 estuaries. Additional freshwater inputs originate in Mexico, the Yucatan Peninsula, and Cuba.

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Resources

The Gulf of Mexico ecosystem provides a wide array of valuable resources to the nations on its shores.

- **Fisheries**

Gulf fisheries are some of the most productive in the world. In 2010 according to the National Marine Fisheries Service, the commercial fish and shellfish harvest from the five U.S. Gulf states was estimated to be 1.3 billion pounds valued at \$639 million. The Gulf also contains four of the top seven fishing ports in the nation by weight. The Gulf of Mexico has eight of the top twenty fishing ports in the nation by dollar value.

Shrimp: Gulf landings of shrimp led the Nation in 2010 with 177.2 million pounds valued at \$340 million dockside, accounting for about 82% of U.S. total. Texas led all Gulf states with 77.0 million pounds; Louisiana with 74.1 million pounds; Florida (west coast) with 11.8 Alabama with 10.0 million pounds; and Mississippi with 4.1 million pounds.

Oysters: The Gulf led in production of oysters in 2010 with 15.7 million pounds of meats valued at \$54.5 million and representing 59% of the national total.

Recreational: The Gulf also supports a productive recreational fishery. In 2010, marine recreational participants took more than 20.7 million trips catching 145.4 million fish from the Gulf of Mexico and surrounding waters. The total weigh in pounds was over 59.3 million in 2010.

- **Physical / Mineral**

In 2006 470 million barrels of oil and about $(2.9) \times 10^9$ Thousand Cubic Feet of natural gas came from the Gulf of Mexico. In 2005 more than 466 million barrels of oil and about $(3.19) \times 10^9$ Thousand Cubic Feet of natural gas was produced from the Gulf of Mexico. This represents an increase of almost 4 million barrels of oil and $(.2) \times 10^9$ Thousand Cubic Feet of natural gas in one year. According to the Minerals Management Service, offshore operations in the Gulf produce a quarter of the U.S. domestic natural gas and one-eighth of its oil. In addition, the offshore petroleum industry employs over 55,000 U.S. workers in the Gulf.

- **Habitat**

Gulf habitats include coastal wetlands, submerged vegetation, important upland areas, and marine/offshore areas. Encompassing over five million acres (about half of the U.S. total), the Gulf's coastal wetlands serve as an essential habitat for numerous fish and wildlife species, including migrating waterfowl (about 75% traversing the U.S.), seabirds, wading birds, furbearers, and sport and commercial fisheries.

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Population

The coastal population of the five states of the Gulf of Mexico is projected by the Census Bureau to increase from a total of 44.2 million in 1995 to an estimated 61.4 million in 2025, nearly a 40% increase. Texas and Florida are the most rapidly growing states.

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Tourism

The Gulf of Mexico's shores and beaches, offering an ideal location for swimming, sun, and all water sports, supports a \$20 billion tourist industry.

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Maritime Shipping

The Port of South Louisiana (New Orleans) and the Port of Houston are two of the ten busiest ports in the world by cargo volume. Out of the top ten sea ports in the United States 7 are located on the Gulf of Mexico.

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Agriculture

Agricultural production (crops, livestock, and associated products) in the Gulf States totaled nearly \$29 billion in 2001 according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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GULF FOOTNOTES

- The Gulf of Mexico yields more finfish, shrimp, and shellfish annually than the south and mid-Atlantic, Chesapeake, and New England areas combined.
- More than 400 species of shells can be found in the Gulf of Mexico. Gulf beaches are considered the best shelling beaches in North America.
- The world's longest man-made beach is located on the Mississippi Gulf Coast – 26 miles long.
- The Mississippi River deposits more than 3.3 million gallons of water into the Gulf every second.
- The Mississippi River contributes more than 90 percent of the fresh water entering the Gulf.
- Bottlenose dolphins are the most common dolphin species in the Gulf and are estimated to number up to 45,000.
- Indian mounds on the campus of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge were built 450 years before the first Egyptian pyramid.
- On a 1699 expedition, Pierre le Moyne and his brother Jean Baptiste le Moyne found an area on high bluffs along the Mississippi River. In their diaries, they tell of a pole – stained with the blood of fish and animals – that served as the dividing line between two Native American tribes, the Bayougoula and the Houmas. The blood-stained pole gave the town of Baton Rouge its name, which means "red stick" in French.
- The Friendship Oak on the Mississippi Gulf Coast is more than 500 years old. It is said that those who stand beneath its shade "remain friends through all their lifetime no matter where fate may take them in after years."
- In 1703, Mardi Gras was first celebrated in the French colony of Mobile. Years later it moved to New Orleans which often gets credit for starting the pre-Lenten carnival.
- The word "Mississippi" means father of waters," and "Biloxi" means "first people."
- The Lake Pontchartrain Causeway Bridge, at 24 miles long, is the second longest continuous overwater bridge in the world.

- The City of New Orleans is actually built 5 to 17 feet below sea level. Huge levees are built to keep the mighty Mississippi from flooding the city.
- The Gulf of Mexico Program is located at John C. Stennis Space Center in Mississippi. This federal city, with NASA as the lead, currently comprises the largest concentration of oceanographers engaged in science and research in the world.

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Gulf of Mexico Program Office
Mail Code: EPA/GMPO
Stennis Space Center, MS 39529-6000
228-688-3726
FAX: 228-688-2709

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This site is maintained by [Jerry Binninger](mailto:binninger.jerry@epa.gov) (binninger.jerry@epa.gov, 228-688-3017) and [Jeanne Allen](mailto:allen.jeanne@epa.gov) (allen.jeanne@epa.gov, 228-688-2761).
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