

Invasive Species Rules Stall

*Conservationists warn slow progress on ballast water,
Asian carp may prove costly*

Jim Lynch / The Detroit News

A year after the Asian carp's threat to the Great Lakes threw a national spotlight on invasive species, critics say no definitive action on the issue's two key focal points has been made.

Ballast water from oceangoing ships, considered the largest source of invasive species in the Great Lakes, remains largely unregulated. And the Mississippi River system, where the Asian carp is firmly entrenched, remains connected to the Great Lakes.

While there has been progress on both issues behind the scenes, conservationists say the pace is unacceptable and leaves the Great Lakes playing a game of Russian roulette year after year.

"Maybe another year or two of waiting doesn't seem daunting, but if you get a new invasion of some species like zebra mussels that shows up in six months, then you could have a catastrophe on your hands," said Andy Buchsbaum, regional director of the National Wildlife Federation's Great Lakes Regional Center.

For years, environmental groups pushed for federal laws that would have forced oceangoing ships to meet a discharge standard for ballast water released into the Great Lakes. According to some calculations, ballast water has been responsible for up to 80 percent of invasive species that have reached the lakes. And those species have an estimated \$200 million-a-year impact on the region.

Invasive viruses have killed thousands of fish. Foreign species like the round goby crowd out native fish. And invasive crustaceans compete with native creatures for the same food.

Plants and industrial sites that utilize the region's lakes are among the operations that have felt the impact of invasive species over the years. Many such operations are forced to clean water intake valves of creatures like the zebra mussel on a regular basis to maintain flow levels.

"We do it every year, and it costs us about \$10,000 each time," said Chuck Bellmore, who operates Mount Clemens' water filtration plant on the shore of Lake St. Clair. "We've been doing it now since 1991."

Turning to alternatives

After a ballast proposal passed in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2008, the legislation languished in the Senate, and no bill was ever enacted. In 2011, there are no new proposals for a sweeping federal bill.

In place of a legislative solution, efforts to control ballast water are moving forward on two administrative fronts. The U.S. Coast Guard is putting together regulations that set a numerical value on the number of organisms that can be discharged per cubic meter of water.

And Great Lakes states are crafting their own ballast rules that could set a discharge standard. Both approaches could require the use of new technologies to clean up water before it enters the Great Lakes.

But even in a best-case scenario, approval and enforcement are at least a year off.

Coast Guard officials could issue their regulations as early as April, yet the technology requirements for Great Lakes ships likely won't kick in until 2016. Among the region's states, Wisconsin is on pace to pass the first laws on ballast water.

The earliest possible implementation of Wisconsin's measure would be a year from now.

"Just because things aren't happening in the way we envisioned a few years ago doesn't mean nothing is happening," said Jennifer Nalbone, campaign director for Great Lakes United, a Buffalo, N.Y.-based international coalition backing efforts to protect the lakes.

Few results in carp fight

On Thursday, Michigan's new attorney general, Bill Schuette, announced plans to continue the legal fight started by his predecessor a year ago to keep the Asian carp out of the Great Lakes. But that battle has produced few results.

Last month, a federal judge rejected the request of Michigan and five other states to order the closure of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, which connects the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River system.

Later in December, the White House announced that separating the two water systems would not be part of its strategy to combat the Asian carp in 2011.

The idea of large slimy fish hurtling through the air — endangering boaters and eating everything in sight in the Great Lakes — put the issue of invasive species on the national political map just over a year ago.

That's when scientists confirmed carp genetic material was present where the Mississippi watershed meets Lake Michigan.

Like the ballast water issue, there has been progress in dealing with the Asian carp threat, but it has been slow and has produced few concrete steps.

The Great Lakes Commission, a U.S.-Canadian public agency promoting the health of the Great Lakes Basin, announced recently that it had secured \$2 million for a study to examine the Chicago waterways and the best way of halting the Asian carp's advance there.

Even that good news is tempered by the timetable involved.

"We are intensively focused on completing the project by the end of 2011 and presenting the options for separation in January 2012," Tim Eder, the commission's executive director, said in a news release last week.

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