

On Eve of New Shipping Season, Great Lakes Remain Unprotected from Aquatic Invasive Species

‘Playing Russian Roulette with Health of Great Lakes’

Ann Arbor, MI (March 24) – On the eve of the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway, conservation groups are urging U.S. and Canadian governments to stop the introduction of aquatic non-native organisms into the lakes and to protect the region’s \$4.5 billion world-class fishery.

“It is unacceptable that, more than 15 years after the discovery of the zebra mussel in the Great Lakes, we are marking the opening of the 2005 Seaway season without any new protections in place from the invaders carried by ocean-going ships,” said Andy Buchsbaum, director of the National Wildlife Federation’s Great Lakes Natural Resource Center in Ann Arbor, Mich.

The No. 1 pathway for non-native aquatic species to enter the Great Lakes is through ballast discharge from ocean-going vessels originating in foreign ports since the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959. One new aquatic non-native species has established itself in the Great Lakes every eight months from all pathways, further disrupting the aquatic food web and threatening the region’s fishery.

“Every time an ocean-going vessel enters the St. Lawrence Seaway it’s like playing Russian roulette with the health of the Great Lakes,” said Jennifer Nalbone, Habitat and Biodiversity Coordinator for Great Lakes United. “Ocean-going vessels constitute a small fraction of the region’s shipping traffic; yet, these are the vessels that are introducing new aquatic invaders into the Great Lakes and jeopardizing the aquatic food web and world-class fishery.”

International import and export constitutes only about 7 percent of traffic on the Great Lakes, according to Army Corps of Engineers data.

The Great Lakes commercial and sport fishery is valued at \$4.5 billion annually, and the annual economic impacts from fishing in the Great Lakes states total \$7 billion, according to 2001 data from the Fish and Wildlife Service. By comparison, \$7 billion in economic benefit is attributed to the movement of bulk goods such as grain, iron ore,

coal, steel and other cargo across the Great Lakes navigation system during the 2003 navigation season.

“This is a tale of two industries, both of which are vital to the region’s economy,” said Buchsbaum. “Currently, these industries are on a collision course, and they don’t have to be. We need policies that support both.”

The opening of the Seaway comes as the U.S. Coast Guard is reviewing its ballast water program which exempts more than 80 percent of the vessels entering the Great Lakes from regulation, and as two Michigan lawmakers are introducing legislation to have states regulate ballast water discharge, due to inaction by the federal governments.

“By making no immediate decisions,” said Nalbhone, “the U.S. and Canadian governments are in fact deciding the fate of the Lakes.”

Meanwhile, aquatic researchers have identified more than a dozen potential invaders to the Great Lakes.

“The question we are confronted with is not if new invaders will arrive in the Great Lakes, but when will they come and how much damage they will cause,” said scientist Anthony Ricciardi of McGill University in Montreal, whose research focuses on species predicted to invade the Great Lakes. “In that context, we have to ask ourselves, ‘Which new species will become the next zebra mussel?’”

Potential invaders that threaten the Great Lakes fishery include a freshwater shrimp, dubbed the “killer shrimp” because of its ferocious feeding behavior, and the monkey goby, an aggressive bottom-dwelling fish that competes with other small fish for food and space, like its cousin, the round goby.

“The U.S. and Canadian governments, and the shipping industry itself, have a responsibility to protect the Great Lakes from invasive species,” added Nalbhone. “The economic and environmental costs of inaction are simply too high.”

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