



## Groups study Great Lakes-Mississippi River split

By John Flesher  
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Traverse City, Michigan - Groups representing states and cities in the Great Lakes region kicked off a \$2 million study Thursday of how to slam the door on exotic species such as Asian carp by cutting links between the lakes and the Mississippi River watershed.

The 18-month project will develop options for physically separating the two drainage basins. They were joined artificially a century ago with the creation of a Chicago-area waterway system that has helped destructive invaders such as zebra and quagga mussels spread as far west as California.

"Ecological separation is the only way we're going to permanently protect against invasive species," said Tim Eder, executive director of the Great Lakes Commission, an agency representing the eight states adjoining the lakes. "Everything short of that is likely to fail."

The commission and the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative are coordinating and raising money for the study. The Joyce Foundation and the Great Lakes Protection Fund have pledged nearly \$700,000 between them, Eder said.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has promised to investigate separation as part of a long-range analysis of exotic species movement between the two water basins. But that could take several years, while advocates of separation want quicker action.

"This is about protecting the ecological and commercial vitality of the Great Lakes, and it is bigger than any one organization can solve alone," Eder said. "Our study will complement and assist the Corps."

More than 180 foreign species have infested the lakes, and the commission estimates annual economic losses at \$5.7 billion.

Bighead and silver carp pose the latest threat. Imported from Asia in the early 1970s to clear algae from Southern fish farms and sewage plants, they escaped into the Mississippi and have migrated northward since.

The voracious filter feeders can reach 4 feet in length and 100 pounds. Scientists say if they spread widely in the Great Lakes, they could decimate the \$7 billion fishing industry by starving out prey fish on which prized species such as salmon and walleye depend.

A live carp was discovered last month in Lake Calumet, part of the Chicago waterway just 6 miles from Lake Michigan. It was past an electronic barrier designed to block their path, and DNA evidence suggests more carp may have eluded the device.

Five Great Lakes states sued the Army Corps and Chicago's water management agency this week in federal court, demanding closure of navigational locks and gates in the waterway network. The Corps and Illinois officials say lock closure would disrupt shipments of steel, oil and other commodities without guaranteeing the carp would be stopped.

Separating the water basins likely would require approval of Congress which would provide much of the funding as well as state and local officials, said David Ullrich, executive director of the Great Lakes cities group. The study is designed to generate as much support as possible for a single approach, he said.

It will consider separating the basins a foregone conclusion and deal only with making it happen, Eder said. Separation likely will require erecting physical barriers or modifying navigational structures, he said.

The study will seek opinions from shippers, water managers, government agencies and other interested groups, tackling issues such as how to transfer cargo between the Chicago waterways and Lake Michigan once the cutoff takes place.

"While separating the waterways would require a complex feat of engineering, we need to understand the costs and benefits and whether this method offers the best hope for a long-term solution," said Sen. Richard Durbin, an Illinois Democrat.

Unlock Our Jobs, an industry coalition that opposes physical separation, said the study should consider less expensive alternatives such as creating zones with high water temperatures or chemicals that would kill aquatic organisms attempting to move between the basins.

"We want a win-win situation that keeps the carp out without completely destroying the economics of the Chicago water system," said Mark Biel, the group's chairman.