

Great Lakes leaders plan study of anti-carp measures

\$2 million initiative to look at ways to halt link between lakes, Mississippi River

By Dan Egan
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Great Lakes governors and mayors - including Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn and Chicago Mayor Richard Daley - are banding together to explore big changes for the Chicago River to protect the world's largest freshwater system.

Just three days after five Great Lakes attorneys general filed a lawsuit to force Chicago to plug the canal system to protect Lake Michigan from the advancing Asian carp, a coalition of regional leaders announced plans Thursday to embark on a \$2 million study to determine just what it will take to get that job done.

The idea of damming the canals is considered anathema to the Chicago business community because of the impact it could have on the barge industry and the way wastewater flows in the Chicago area. But political leaders across the region are taking the idea seriously.

"This study is a critical step in finding the best solution to the problem of invasive species moving through the Chicago Area Waterway System between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River watersheds," said Daley.

"At the same time, it can help identify ways to improve transportation, water quality and water management for the residents of the city of Chicago and the entire region."

The initiative, formally titled "Envisioning a Chicago Area Waterway System for the 21st Century," will be led by the Great Lakes Commission and the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Seaway Cities Initiative, a mayors' group founded by Daley.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has already begun a study of what it would take to restore the divide between the Great Lakes and Mississippi basin that the Chicago canal system destroyed. The study announced Thursday will go beyond its scope to explore ways that a separation could actually benefit the Chicago economy.

"We're talking about problems that go beyond invasive species like Asian carp," said Tim Eder, executive director of the Great Lakes Commission, of which Quinn is chairman.

Eder said the study will analyze options that could enhance the flow of cargo through the Chicago area with the use of intermodal transportation centers that would allow cargo to move smoothly between barges, trucks and rails. It will also look at upgrading wastewater treatment options for the Chicago area, considered a first step in any plan to plug the canal system because it will mean that at least some of Chicago's wastewater would once again flow into Lake Michigan.

These issues were the focus of a two-day Journal Sentinel series, "A River's Reckoning," published earlier this month.

"This is about protecting the ecological and commercial vitality of the Great Lakes, and it is bigger than any one agency can solve alone," Eder said.

"This project is not meant to displace the essential and urgent work of other institutions and government entities," said Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm. "Their responsibility for immediate action to prevent the spread of Asian carp remains. This study tackles the larger longer-term task of redesigning the waterways for sustainability. Both jobs need to be done, and both need to succeed."

Solve problem, create another

The canals were built to flush Chicago's waste down to the Gulf of Mexico, but the legacy of that decision is that the canals have become prime pathways for invasive species to spill between the two basins.

The idea of re-separating has picked up steam with more than conservationists worried about the health of the Great Lakes. Some see it as an opportunity for Chicago to secure a boundless supply of freshwater in the coming centuries.

The Supreme Court has capped the amount of water Chicago can take from the lake at 2.1 billion gallons daily because, unlike other Great Lakes cities, Chicago does not return the water it takes back to the lake. Yet if the city were to re-engineer its river so it flows back into the lake, it would no longer be limited by that cap.

And while industry leaders fret that a plugged canal system could doom barge operators, others see a separation as the opportunity to build a modern intermodal transportation hub that could increase barge traffic into the Chicago region and better integrate it with the region's rails and roads.

"The purpose of the initiative is to put serious, credible, well-designed options on the table," said Eder.

Asian carp have been detected in many areas of the Chicago canal system above an electric fish barrier system designed to keep the invaders from making their way into Lake Michigan, threatening the Great Lakes' \$7 billion fishing industry.

Last month, a 20-pound Asian carp was found just six miles from the Lake Michigan shoreline.

The State of Illinois recently announced a plan to begin harvesting the carp in infested stretches of river in the Mississippi basin, the idea being that if you reduced carp numbers in those areas it will reduce pressure on the fish to expand their range into Lake Michigan.

'A wake-up call'

Still, Illinois leaders say more needs to be done.

"The recent discovery of an Asian carp so close to Lake Michigan was a wake-up call that we need to do more and we need to do it quickly," said Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.).

"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 for containing not only the carp but other invasive species."

The study is expected to take 18 months. It is being funded by the Great Lakes Protection Fund, established two decades ago by Great Lakes governors to pioneer strategic initiatives to protect the health of the world's largest freshwater system.

"Asian carp pose a threat to the Great Lakes that reaches beyond state borders, and it is important to work together - across traditional interests and political boundaries - to fight their spread," said Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle. "The support of the Great Lakes Protection Fund will play an important role in this effort."

The study is also receiving a \$500,000 grant from Chicago's Joyce Foundation, and Eder said other funding sources are also being secured.

Business leaders are dubious of the plan to once again separate the basins, saying it will lead to "economic devastation."

"We don't even know if it's possible," said Mark Biel, executive director of the Chemical Industry Council of Illinois. "To claim this path forward has growing regional support is a gross distortion of the facts."

Joel Brammeier, president of the Alliance for the Great Lakes, said:

"Members of Congress have made it clear that waiting five years for answers won't keep carp out of the Great Lakes. It's gratifying to see the states and cities take up that challenge and build a united front to beat back invaders - fast.

"The Chicago Waterway System still poses the highest carp risk to the Great Lakes. This study can help peel back the veil that's needlessly shrouding innovative solutions to ecological and economic problems."