

Balancing the Interests of the Economy & Great Lakes Ecosystem

by Tim Anderson



BATTLE OVER INVASIVE SPECIES

CHICAGO—Brett Kirbach of Illinois Marine Towing stands watch while working on the Windy City tow boat. State leaders are striving to balance the sometimes competing interests of the economy and the Great Lakes ecosystem.

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Policymakers are striving to find a balance between protecting the delicate ecosystem of the Great Lakes and preserving much-needed jobs.

The problem comes in the form of invasive aquatic species entering the Great Lakes.

Take, for example, the case of sea lamprey, a fish native to the Atlantic Ocean that came to, and then spread throughout, the lakes via manmade shipping canals built in the 1800s.

By the middle of the 20th century, sea lampreys were wreaking havoc on the Great Lakes ecosystem and fishing industry. The population of lake trout was decimated. To this day, the U.S. and Canadian governments are spending millions of dollars a year to control this non-native fish.

More than 180 nonindigenous species have been detected in the Great Lakes. Some are harmless, but others—such as the sea lamprey—have had a profound ecological impact.

Wisconsin Rep. Cory Mason, whose district borders Lake Michigan and also includes some of the state's treasured 15,000 inland lakes, is all too familiar with the impact these invasions can have.

"We've certainly had to deal with the zebra mussel problems in Lake Michigan, and invasive species in our inland lakes change how people can use them," Mason said. "They affect our quality of life. And once they're here, there is no redoing it. They're here permanently."

Tough New Standards

Led in part by lawmakers like Mason, states have taken a lead role over the past decade in trying to keep invasive species out of the Great Lakes.

Today, the fight is centered in New York, which plans to begin enforcing the toughest standards on ballast water discharges in the country next year.

Late in 2011, Mason spearheaded a letter-writing campaign—signed by 21 Wisconsin lawmakers—urging New York to stand by its rules.

"Because of its geographic location, New York is a first-in port of entry, so a tougher standard in that state means protecting the entire basin," Mason said.

He points out that invasive species are not only an ecological threat, but also have an economic consequence. A study by University of Notre Dame researcher David Lodge estimated that these non-native species cost the Great Lakes region \$200 million a year.

But some state and federal leaders believe New York's rules go too far in trying to address the threat.

While the seaway has opened up a new pathway for invasive species to come to the Great Lakes, it has opened up new economic opportunities for the region to trade with the