Army Corps expedites Asian carp study; report now expected in 2013

By Tim Anderson
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Under an expedited timeline that had been sought by state and federal lawmakers alike, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is planning to release in 2013 a set of options for keeping Asian carp out of the Great Lakes.

“This new step will result in a more focused path forward that could mean faster implementation,” John Goss, Asian carp director at the White House Council on Environmental Quality, said in May.

Still, it remains to be seen whether a permanent solution can be found to the problem — which poses significant economic and ecological risks to the Great Lakes region, but which also has divided the region due to conflicting interests among the different states.

The Corps had originally planned to release a final study in late 2015, citing the need for enough time to collect data and investigate control technologies.

But groups such as the Great Lakes Legislative Caucus urged the Corps to fast-track its study. In addition, legislation has been introduced in the U.S. Congress requiring an accelerated timeline, a move also requested in federal court by five Great Lakes attorneys general (Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin).

By 2013, the Corps will deliver to the U.S. Congress a series of options along with cost estimates for each. It has already identified 90 technologies that are or could be used to keep invasive species from moving between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River watersheds — including hydrologic separation, sound and electric barriers, the application of chemicals and fish poison into waterways, mechanical fish harvesting and the use of pheromones.

The potential Great Lakes invasion of Asian carp — which has decimated fish populations in parts of the Mississippi River system — has led to calls to separate the two watersheds by constructing a permanent ecological barrier (or multiple barriers) in the Chicago Area Waterway System.

Earlier this year, the Great Lakes Commission and the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative issued a report detailing the alternatives. The lowest-cost option for the physical separation of the two watersheds was pegged at $4.3 billion. Those costs include not only construction of an ecological barrier in the Chicago Area Waterway System, but also other changes that would likely have to be made: improving the region’s stormwater infrastructure, for example, and finding ways to
accommodate the commercial and recreational traffic that uses the system.

Asian carp is one of 39 invasive species identified by the Army Corps [7] as having the potential to move from one watershed to the other via the Chicago system. And that system is one of 19 pathways (see map) that the Corps has identified as potentially transferring aquatic invaders between the watersheds.

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