Ever since Asian carp were found to be dangerously close to entering the lakes, the region’s states and governments have been on high alert. And part of their response has been to travail closer together— for example, sharing samples and personnel, expertise and supplies such as Rotenone, the chemical used to stop the carp’s advance.

Earlier this year, at a meeting of the Council of Great Lakes Governors, the region’s governors and premiers signed a mutual-aid agreement that formalizes the process for how jurisdictions assist each other when an invasive-species threat arises.

The September exercise in western Lake Erie focused on the logistics for implementing an inter-jurisdictional response through this aid agreement. What would be the basinwide response, for example, if bighead and silver carp were detected in this part of the basin?

The Michigan and Ohio departments of natural resources directed the exercise, which had crews using electrofishing and netting in the search for grass carp, bighead carp and silver carp.

Earlier this year, Illinois and Indiana officials led inter-jurisdictional crews on a search for Eurasian ruffe — an invasive fish first discovered in Lake Superior in 1986. This exercise was the first of its kind in which provisions of the new mutual-aid agreement were used.

Pete Johnson, deputy director of the Council of Great Lakes Governors, says that while the new agreement was based in part on existing interstate emergency-management pacts, there was no model for a pact that addresses aquatic invasive species.

The new agreement focuses specifically on these species, while also addressing issues ranging from communication protocols and the sharing of scientific information, to liability and reimbursement. By establishing these procedures ahead of time, says Johnson, states and provinces can then focus squarely on an invasive species problem when it occurs. And as the recent exercise in Lakes Erie and Michigan shows, the agreements make it possible for all parts of the lakes to work together to prevent invasive species from entering the basin.

A basinwide threat such as invasive species, he says, warrants a basinwide response.