Less than two months after a silver carp (one of four species of Asian carp) was found nine miles from Lake Michigan and beyond the three electric barriers designed to prevent their movement, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers unveiled a plan [2] that would add a new layer of protection for the Great Lakes.

For a cost of $275 million, the Corps says, a mix of structural barriers and other control measures could be installed at the Brandon Road Lock and Dam. The federal agency released its “tentatively selected plan” in August and is taking public comments through Oct. 2.

The entire Great Lakes region has been on high alert about the threat of Asian carp since at least 2009, when eDNA testing indicated the likelihood of Asian carp in the Chicago Area Waterway System (which connects to Lake Michigan). In 2010, a live bighead carp was discovered beyond the electric barriers, in Lake Calumet.

Asian carp already have caused great harm to the Mississippi River ecosystem, and their introduction into the Great Lakes could decimate native fish populations. In response to the threat, Great Lakes states and provinces have partnered with federal agencies (through the Asian Carp Regional Coordinating Committee) on a mix of control strategies, such as the construction of electric barriers, enhanced monitoring, and the mass removal of Asian carp in the Upper Illinois Waterway.

Kevin Irons, aquatic nuisance species program manager for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, says the discovery in June of a live silver carp beyond the electric barriers was “surprising,” and it’s not known how this fish got to the Little Calumet River.

But he adds that subsequent findings have been reassuring, including the fact that no additional bighead or silver carps were caught or seen even after the extensive use of electrofishing and contract netting (more than 20,000 fish were captured as part of this regional response to the discovery in June).

Plus there’s this fact, Irons says: With all of the additional monitoring in place since 2010, only two Asian carp have been found above the barriers. “I’m very confident that we’ve got the latitude, and the help we need with federal funding, to put in place the best defense against Asian carp,” he says.

But is the current control strategy enough to adequately protect the Great Lakes?

That will be one of the questions for policymakers to consider as they make decisions about what to do, if anything, at Brandon Road. The Army Corps’ study was years in the making, and its release was delayed for several months. “The [Trump] Administration sat on it in reaction to pressure from industry groups and officials from the states of Illinois and Indiana,” the Alliance for the Great Lakes and other conservation groups said [3] in an August statement following release of the Brandon Road study.


According to the Army Corps, its tentatively selected plan offers the best chance of meeting two goals: 1) keeping Asian carp and other invasive species from being established in the Great Lakes basin; and 2) providing for “continued navigation” along the waterway that connects the Mississippi River and Great Lakes basins.

But in its August study, the Corps points out several “unresolved issues.” Those include concerns about the impact on commercial shipping as well as the need to secure federal funding and to find a “nonfederal sponsor” that pays for 35
percent of engineering and design costs (a requirement under U.S. law).

Though the project would be done in Illinois, that state is unlikely to serve as the nonfederal sponsor. Earlier this year, in an article for the *Chicago Tribune*, Illinois Lt. Gov. Evelyn Sanguinetti warned that new Asian carp controls at Brandon Road would disrupt commercial navigation and damage the region’s economy.

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