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Stop Invasive Species, Michigan Groups Urge Congress as Seaway Opens

LANSING, MI. (March 20)—As the St. Lawrence Seaway prepares to open tomorrow, Michigan conservationists are urging the federal government to pass comprehensive legislation to stop the introduction of invasive species into the Great Lakes.

“It is unacceptable that the Seaway is opening and the Great Lakes remain unprotected from aquatic invaders that are wreaking havoc on our economy and quality of life,” said Jennifer McKay, Policy Specialist, Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council. “The longer we wait, the more invaders enter the Great Lakes. We have solutions to this problem and it is time to use them by passing comprehensive federal legislation.”

Michigan groups support passage of the National Aquatic Invasive Species Act (S. 725), a bill that takes a comprehensive approach to preventing and controlling aquatic invasive species from vectors including ballast water, the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, and importation and trade.

This year marks the fourth time in as many years that Congress has introduced legislation to protect the Great Lakes from invasive species, yet no bill has come to the floor for a vote.

“Invasive species will continue to harm the Great Lakes until action is taken to stop them from entering,” said Jan O’Connell, National Vice President and Chair of Conservation Governance, Sierra Club. “Congressional foot-dragging will only make the problem worse and cost citizens more money. It’s time to pass comprehensive invasive species legislation to protect the millions of people who depend on the lakes for their economic and cultural identity.”

At least 183 non-native species have been identified in the Great Lakes, and one new species is discovered in the lakes every 28 weeks from a variety of vectors. The No. 1 pathway for non-native aquatic species to enter the Great Lakes is through ballast discharge from ocean-going vessels originating in foreign ports.

The National Aquatic Invasive Species Act was introduced by Senators Carl Levin (D-MI) and Susan Collins (R-Maine). Complementary bills have not yet been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The bill:

- Addresses prevention, research, outreach and education, early detection, rapid response, control, and management of invasive species in the Great Lakes and nationally.

- Addresses ballast water discharge by requiring all ocean-going vessels in the Great Lakes to meet an environmentally protective standard by 2012.
- Requires that ocean-going vessels officially defined as having “no ballast on board” implement practices that prevent new infestations of non-native species.
- Applies best-performing ballast water management practices and rapid response plans to vessels that operate in the Great Lakes to control the spread of invaders already introduced.
- Establishes for the first time a federal screening process for organisms proposed for importation and trade.
- Prevents the Asian carp from entering the Great Lakes by authorizing the last line of defense against the fish—an electric barrier on the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal.

“It’s time to take the bull by the horn and shut the door on invasive species,” said Donna Stine, Executive Director, Michigan United Conservation Clubs. “We have solutions, and it is time to use them so that we can protect our economy and way of life for the millions of people who depend on the Great Lakes.”