

## **Message to Congress: Protect Michigan's summer fun!**

Memorial Day weekend marks the start of Northern Michigan's tourist season as many travelers make their way "up north" to experience and enjoy our many magnificent waters. But, the waters we know and enjoy are being impacted by invaders that have already changed the ecosystem and more threaten to enter our waters if something isn't done soon.

"The invasion of exotic species is one of the gravest dangers facing the Great Lakes today taking over Great Lakes' ecosystems not only at the expense of native species, but also to the expense of Great Lakes residents and businesses as well," said Jennifer McKay, Policy Specialist at Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council in Petoskey.

From zebra mussels to Eurasian milfoil to round gobies, outdoor enthusiasts have had plenty of non-native nuisances to worry about. But many of us haven't directly felt the impacts of invasive species in our lives yet. This summer season could be different thanks to a new pathogen found in the Great Lakes.

Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia (VHS) is a disease that causes fish to bleed internally. Discovered in Lake Huron in 2005, the disease spread into Lake Erie and recently was discovered in Budd Lake, an inland lake in Clare County (in the northern part of the Lower Peninsula). Department of Natural Resources biologists fear the disease has also worked its way into Lake Michigan.

VHS is a disease that has the potential to devastate entire fish populations. There is no known cure or vaccination. VHS is not a native disease and like so many other aquatic invaders, is suspected to have been delivered to our waters in the ballast of ocean-going vessels.

While zebra mussels and other aquatic invaders have had a major impact on the Great Lakes (and inland lakes), VHS will have an impact on recreational anglers this summer. Michigan's Natural Resources Commission introduced draft regulations to try and prevent the spread of this disease at their May meeting. These regulations will be voted on in June.

Anglers must make certain that fish they catch in VHS-infected waters are not released into any waters that have been listed as free of VHS. The transport of bait is also prohibited. Anglers must also make certain that bait obtained from a VHS-positive area be used only in another VHS-positive area.

Sound confusing? It is. And it's a shame.

These exotics have invaded our lakes and impacted our lives. Summer recreation, while

still the best part of Michigan's outdoor heritage, is no longer quite so easy - we must clean the bottoms of our boats to prevent the spreading of zebra mussels, treat our inland lakes to keep the milfoil from clogging the waterways, and now we have to keep our bait and fish on the right side of the VHS positive or negative waters.

More than 180 invasive species entered the Great Lakes since the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway and Chicago Shipping Canal. Currently, a new invasive species enters the Great Lakes every eight months. Every year, millions of dollars are spent on damages and control costs due to invasive species. These invasive species harm commercial and recreational fisheries, cause hazards on beaches, damage power plant and municipal water infrastructure, and alter the Great Lakes food chain causing native species to alter their feeding habits or become extinct.

Meanwhile, Federal legislators continue to drag their feet on a bill that would help stop the flow of invasive species. The National Aquatic Invasive Species Act (S. 725), introduced by Senator Carl Levin (D-MI), would enact national ballast water laws that will require appropriate treatment for ballast to kill any potential invasive species before they can be dumped into the Great Lakes. This comprehensive legislation would initiate a plan to help prevent and control invasive species that enter the Great Lakes in the future.

“There is far too much at stake to wait any longer to respond to the tide of invasive species,” said McKay. “It is essential for the federal government to act swiftly to prevent new introductions.”

Contact your member of Congress and let them know that you want to see comprehensive aquatic invasive species legislation enacted to ensure our Great Lakes heritage and way of life is protected for future generations to enjoy.