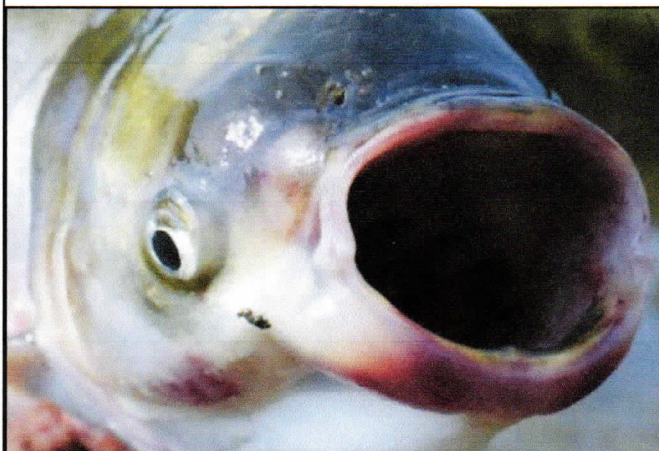


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Dreaded carp near Lake Michigan



Officials say it's necessary to risk poisoning thousands of fish to keep silver carp, left, and Asian carp out of Lake Michigan.

Asian carp are close to Lake Michigan, raising 'code-red' alarms to keep the fish out of the Great Lakes.

By **TOM MEERSMAN**, Star Tribune

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The Asian carp may have slipped through a \$9 million barrier designed to protect the Great Lakes and a \$7 billion sport fishery from the voracious invader.

State and federal officials reported Friday that

scientists detected DNA from silver and bighead carp in 32 water samples in two areas 10 miles or more above the electric fish barriers in a Chicago ship canal that were built as the last chance to keep the fish from entering the Great Lakes.

"This is very bad news," said Dan Thomas, president of the Great Lakes Sport Fishing Council.

It is not clear whether the carp breached or bypassed the two electric barriers, or whether they got into the waters in some other way. No fish have been captured yet, and the next few weeks will include attempts to find them, plus additional water sampling. One of the areas that tested positive for the fish is about 8 miles from Lake Michigan.

Cameron Davis, Environmental Protection Agency senior adviser on Great Lakes issues, said it is not a foregone conclusion that carp will enter Lake Michigan. "We're going to throw anything we can at them to keep them out," he said.

The carp are a major ecological threat, based on their track record in the Mississippi River and several of its tributaries.

"Asian carp are like cancer cells," he said. "They can grow and spread very quickly and overtake healthy native organisms."

That has set off alarm bells for anglers, who

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worry that the carp could hurt the region's \$4.5 billion fishery, and spread into tributaries that are popular for fishing, boating and other recreation.

A coalition of Great Lakes environmental groups called for the immediate closure of all Illinois locks and gateways in the Chicago area that lead to Lake Michigan, at least until scientists determine where the invasive fish are and how they arrived.

"This is really a code-red type of situation," said Mark Smith, policy manager for the National Wildlife Federation's Great Lakes office in Ann Arbor, Mich.

The carp have devastated fisheries along the Mississippi River and its tributaries by consuming plant food needed by mussels and small fish and taking over the ecosystem.

All is not lost

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announced the results of the most recent tests at a Friday telephone news conference. The Corps operates two electric barriers designed to repel Asian carp. Major General John Peabody, commanding general of the Corps' Great Lakes and Ohio River Division, said it's not clear how the fish got into waters above the barriers, and cautioned that no carp have been caught yet.

David Lodge, biologist at the University of Notre

Dame who conducted the studies, said even though no carp have been spotted, "It's hard to come to any other conclusion other than that there are carp somewhere in the vicinity where we sampled their DNA."


Lodge said the tests have some limitations: They do not show how recently the carp may have been in the area, and because the water is flowing, the location of the water samples is not exactly where carp are located.

Lodge said the discovery of carp DNA -- about 20 miles closer to Lake Michigan than where the fish were previously detected -- is no reason to abandon efforts to find and remove them, and prevent others from moving north. "There are lots of cases well documented from many parts of the world where a small number of organisms may invade a new area, but they may die out before they establish a sustainable, reproducing population," he said.

Army Corps officials said that it's more important than ever to keep the electric barriers operating to reduce the number of carp that could otherwise swim up the canal system and into the lakes.

However, Corps officials announced last week that the newer barrier needs to be shut down for maintenance for four or five days in early December, and it plans to poison all fish in a six-mile stretch of canal between the barriers and a

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downstream lock to assure that no carp move north.

Big fish bring big appetites

Doug Jensen, aquatic invasive species coordinator for the University of Minnesota Sea Grant in Duluth, said Asian carp "basically cut the legs out of an ecosystem by consuming plankton and other foods needed for native fish."

It is not clear whether they will do more damage to fisheries and recreation in the big lakes than they have done in rivers, Jensen said.

Bigheads grow to more than 100 pounds and silver carp can reach 60 pounds. Besides out-competing other fish for food, silver carp can jump several feet out of the water when they are disturbed by boat motors. They have caused broken arms, neck injuries and other problems for boaters, water skiers and personal watercraft drivers.

Commercial catfish operators in the South imported Asian carp from China in the 1970s to control algae growth in large aquaculture ponds. The carp escaped in the early 1980s and have been making their way up the Mississippi River and its tributaries.

Luke Skinner, invasive species program supervisor for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, said that commercial

fishermen had "multiple catches" of Asian carp in the Winona area in the fall of 2008, but so far all have been adult fish and there is no evidence yet that they are reproducing.

Skinner said that the presence of carp so close to Lake Michigan is a serious concern, and that Minnesota and Wisconsin are in the loop to provide technical help and supplies if needed to fight the invaders. "We look at this as a regional issue, not just as an Illinois issue at all," he said.

Peabody said that more DNA water tests are underway, and a rapid response group of state and federal agencies will analyze that data and other information as they decide next steps.

Lodge said that for any biological invasion, keeping the numbers as low as possible is the best strategy. "The bottom line is that it's way too early to give up," he said.

Tom Meersman • 612-673-7388

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