



For Immediate Release
January 29, 2009

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New Report Offers Ominous Forecast for the Great Lakes, Especially Lake Erie

Toledo, Sandusky, and Ashtabula ports most at risk for future invasions of aquatic invasive species

Columbus, OH – Lake Erie, via Toledo’s port, is at the greatest risk for future aquatic invasive species introductions via transoceanic ships, according to a recent USEPA report, *Predicting Future Introductions of Nonindigenous Species to the Great Lakes*.

“This is an urgent wake-up call that we need strong federal legislation to plug the drain on any new introductions of exotic, invasive pests in Lake Erie,” said Kristy Meyer, Director of Agricultural & Clean Water Programs for the Ohio Environmental Council.

According to the report, from 2006-2007, 382 metric tons of ballast water were discharged at Great Lakes ports from 107 different vessels. While the port in Duluth, WI, received the most ballast water discharge in total, Toledo’s port--which provides the most suitable habitat for aquatic invasive species--received more than 70,000 metric tons of ballast water discharge from vessels, making Toledo the port of greatest concern.

What may be even more frightening is the report’s finding that ships claiming to have no ballast on board (NOBOBs) had almost triple the amount of discharges than ballasted ships, at 1,730 discharges and 618 respectively. Roughly 90% of all the ships that enter the St. Lawrence Seaway claim that they have no ballast on board, although in reality they actually may have potentially devastating creatures that remain and survive in the residual material left in the ballast tanks. These NOBOBs can then take on ballast water in the Seaway, most likely when they are off loading cargo, and later discharge the potentially invested waters at one or more Great Lakes ports.

The report finds that the top three Great Lakes ports receiving the most ballast discharges from NOBOBs include Toledo, Sandusky and Ashtabula. Ashtabula was an extreme case, with 297 discharges from NOBOBs, totaling close to 600,000 metric tons of ballast water discharge.

The report also projects that as Great Lakes water temperatures will likely warm because of global warming. These warmer waters will provide even more suitable habitable for species hitchhiking their way to the Great Lakes from the Ponto-Caspian region.

Last month, Ohio EPA's 401 Water Quality Certification for Lake Erie shippers took effect. The new state permits implement the USEPA's Vessel General Permit for Discharges Incidental to the Normal Operation of Commercial Vessels and Large Recreational Vessel. The permits require ships to either exchange their coastal ballast water with open ocean water or flush their ballast holds with salt-water. In theory, these practices are intended to purge or kill the freshwater non-native species. In reality, though, many species are able to adjust to both saltwater and freshwater, especially species from the Ponto-Caspian region. According to the report, these species tend to have a broader salinity tolerance developed through a geological history that includes fluctuating water levels and salinities,

These destructive pests pose an imminent and growing threat to Ohio's aquatic biodiversity and economy. Exotic species can saddle state and local governments with expensive clean-up costs. Some Lake Erie large water users spend \$350,000 to \$400,000 each year to clear zebra mussels from intake pipes, which can result in increased burden to taxpayers and water users. Federal agencies estimate that clean-up costs of zebra mussels will top \$5 billion over the next 10 years for utilities and manufacturers, alone.

"Ohioans cannot afford to continue to be burdened by expensive clean-up costs," said Meyer. "President Obama made a campaign pledge to curb the tide of aquatic invasive species introductions via ballast water. His next piece of business should be working with Congress to enact strong federal ballast water legislation. We cannot rely on the Ohio EPA's weak permit to slam the door on invasive species."

In order to be effective, federal ballast water legislation must:

- Provide strong treatment technology standards that are 100 times stricter than the International Maritime Organization's standards, because ballast water exchange and salt-water flushing technology won't curb the tide of introductions of new species;
- Require vessels to install ballast water treatment technology to meet stringent performance standards beginning in 2012, with only one possible two-year extension if the Coast Guard determines that such technology does not exist;
- Require NOBOBs to salt-water flush until they install treatment technology on their ships;
- Develop a national rapid response plan, which includes detailed ways to detect, kill, remove, or minimize the spread of aquatic nuisance species in U.S. waters;
- Give the Coast Guard enforcement authority and give the USEPA the authority to review and improve the treatment technology standards; and
- Provide citizens with the power to force the Coast Guard to enforce the law.

Currently, scientists estimate that there are 185 known invasive species of fish, invertebrates, and plants, including algae and phragmites that have become established within the Great Lakes. The number continues to grow every year.

According to scientists, on average, a new, potentially devastating invasive species is discovered in the Great Lakes every 28 weeks. Scientists warn that without a proper management regime, Lake Erie will continue to face waves of exotic species invasions for years to come. While ballast water isn't the only avenue for introductions, it is the most frequent route of introduction and it is relatively easy to control through the use of ballast water treatment technology.

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The mission of the Ohio Environmental Council (OEC) is to secure healthy air, land, and water for all who call Ohio home. The OEC is Ohio's leading advocate for fresh air, clean water, and sustainable land use. The OEC has a 40-year history of innovation, pragmatism, and success. Using legislative initiatives, legal action, scientific principles, and statewide partnerships, the OEC secures a healthier environment for Ohio's families and communities. For more information, visit www.theOEC.org.