

Stowaway species

by *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Although we have supported states acting to stem the flow of invasive species into the Great Lakes by more closely regulating the ballast water of oceangoing freighters, the best way to address the issue is at the federal level. And at long last, the feds are starting to move.

The House recently passed the Coast Guard Reauthorization Act, which would, among other things, require all ships entering U.S. waters to treat their ballast water to get rid of foreign species along for the ride. The Senate now needs to act - and act soon - before the politics of an election year overwhelm all other business.

As the Journal Sentinel's Dan Egan pointed out in a recent article, the measure covers all U.S. ports but would be particularly significant for the Great Lakes, which have been hit hard by invasive species since the St. Lawrence Seaway opened the lakes to global traffic in 1959.

Ballast is used to stabilize less-than-full cargo vessels on the open seas. It poses an environmental hazard because species can be sucked into a ship's ballast tanks at one port and discharged in exchange for cargo when it arrives at the next port.

Scientists have found that the overwhelming majority of invaders into the planet's largest freshwater system since 1970 have arrived in oceangoing ballast tanks. The lakes are now home to more than 180 non-native species, and the problem gets worse every year; a new species is discovered in the lakes, on average, about every six months. Species such as the zebra mussel have changed the nature of the Great Lakes habitat and have caused billions of dollars in damage. House passage of the legislation was praised by environmental groups. "These standards and timeline are both aggressive and achievable, and this is exactly the type of strong legislation the environmental community has championed for years," said Corry Westbrook, legislative director for the National Wildlife Federation, in a news release.

The overwhelming support in the House (which approved the measure 395-7) needs to be duplicated in the Senate because President Bush has promised to veto the measure, largely over issues unrelated to the ballast part of the bill. Fortunately, sufficient support may be there, and both of Wisconsin's senators said they were eager to see a new law to protect the Great Lakes.

But the Senate needs to act soon to ensure that the lakes and other U.S. waterways open to invasive species from oceangoing freighters get the protection they need.

Reprinted from *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* © CNS.

Stowaway species by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel