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Indiana wetland is latest Asian carp battleground

By Matt Markey, Toledo Blade, therepublic.com

In the grassy belly of a wetland known as Eagle Marsh, Mother Nature decides what water goes down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico and what will end up in Lake Erie via the Maumee River.

When adjacent watersheds harbor a finned toxin such as the dreaded Asian carp, this swampy mixing bowl becomes a hot spot for an irreparable breach in the natural and manmade barriers that have, so far, kept the carp out of the Great Lakes and its river systems.

The carp is approaching the Great Lakes' shores, threatening the \$7 billion a year sport-fishing industry on the Great Lakes. The marsh's proximity to the Maumee "make that place ground zero in this fight to keep the carp out," said Paul Pacholski, a Lake Erie charter boat captain for nearly three decades. "If they get through that marsh to the Maumee, it's over. It would be a disaster of biblical proportion."

Because these carp grow upward of 100 pounds and consume a quarter of their body weight per day, they monopolize the food sources for other fish and aquatic life forms, collapsing a complex food web in the waterway.

"Asian carp" is a generic term for four species of nonnative fish: bighead, silver, black and grass carp.

Grass carp were brought to this country to reduce vegetation in rearing ponds on fish farms. Bighead and silver carp have been used to clean sewage ponds. Black carp are used to devour snails that carry a parasite deadly to catfish raised on commercial fish farms in the South.

When the Asian carp started to escape the fish farms and sewage retention ponds about 40 years ago in periods of flooding, they began making their way into the Mississippi River system. They have been on a relentless northward march ever since.

They have spread into the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers in Tennessee and a wide range of major waterways in Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota. They have been documented in the Mississippi River in downtown Minneapolis.

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There are two likely routes for the carp to reach Lake Erie. The first is the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, which connects the Mississippi River system with Lake Michigan via the Des Plaines River.

An electrical barrier is in place there, ostensibly to keep the carp from reaching the lake, although carp DNA has been detected beyond the barrier.

The second flash point is in Eagle Marsh. It sits on the St. Lawrence Continental Divide, an imaginary line that separates the rivers that flow south toward the Gulf of Mexico from those that generally flow north and east to the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence Seaway.

A project to construct a "temporary" barrier to hold back mature Asian carp is under way, until the Army Corps of Engineers and assorted other governmental agencies can devise a more lasting remedy.

Some parties have cast a skeptical eye toward the fence because its openings allow the free flow of water. Fish eggs could easily pass through. But Phil Bloom, communications director for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, said the Asian carp's spawning habits make that unlikely.

"They need high water, a steady flow, and when they drop their eggs, the eggs tumble downstream for a period of time until they hatch," he said.

In the fight to keep the carp out of the Maumee River and the Great Lakes as a whole, the stakes are immeasurably high.

Asian carp -- with no natural predators and with explosive reproductive abilities and an insatiable appetite for the plankton that so many native fish rely on -- loom like a scaly grim reaper.

Ray Petering, newly retired executive administrator of the Ohio Division of Wildlife's fish management group, said in a Sea Grant update that this was a one-strike-and-you're-out game with the Asian carp and its threat to the Great Lakes.

"Once they gain access to the large systems, like the way these carp did with the Mississippi River," Petering said, "the game's over."