



Ballast-water plan for invasives criticized

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TRAVERSE CITY -- A government plan to prevent foreign species carried in ship ballast tanks from invading seacoasts, the Great Lakes and inland waterways is riddled with loopholes and would take effect too slowly, environmentalists say.

Shipping companies, meanwhile, contend the regulations proposed by the U.S. Coast Guard would make costly and unreasonable demands while adding to a confusing patchwork of federal and state requirements for handling ballast water.

The Coast Guard is accepting public comments on the rules through today and could make changes before issuing a final version, said Cmdr. Tim Cummins of the 9th District Prevision Division in Cleveland. No deadline has been set for completing the regulations.

More than 300 comments had been submitted by Thursday.

Environmentalists have long demanded a crackdown on the dumping of ballast -- millions of gallons of water and muck that ships carry to help keep them stable in rough seas. The soupy mixtures often harbor microorganisms, fish and other aquatic life scooped up in overseas ports.

When discharged in U.S. waters, the foreigners often multiply and overrun native species, doing vast ecological and economic damage. Dealing with shipborne invaders such as zebra mussels is believed to cost more than \$200 million per year in the Great Lakes region.

In recent years, the U.S. and Canadian governments ordered oceangoing ships to exchange ballast water or rinse empty tanks at sea to try to kill or wash out invaders.

The Coast Guard regulations would go further by limiting the number of invasive organisms in ballast water released in U.S. territory. Ships would have to install devices to kill most -- if not all -- organisms.

Initially, the limit would follow a formula used by the International Maritime Commission and some states but considered weak by many environmentalists. By 2016, the standard would be similar to California's, which is considered 1,000 times more stringent than the international commission's.

Environmental groups said the phase-in period is too long and disputed industry contentions that shippers can't move faster because technology is still under development or too expensive and cumbersome.

They also criticized a provision that could postpone the deadline for years if the Coast Guard decides it isn't workable.

"That's potentially a huge loophole that could delay implementation indefinitely," said Jennifer Nalbene of Great Lakes United, a U.S.-Canadian advocacy group. "We know there are systems that meet the standard right now, and every year we wait is a gamble that more invasive species will get through."

The Coast Guard should defer to the Environmental Protection Agency, which is reconsidering permit requirements for ballast and other ship discharges set by the Bush administration in 2008, said Nina Bell, director of Northwest Environmental Advocates in Portland, Ore.

"The Coast Guard isn't drawing a line in the sand and ordering the shipping industry to protect our waters," Bell said. "They're saying maybe they will, maybe they won't, they'll figure it out as they go."

Shippers said they understood ballast treatment requirements were necessary but called for one national standard that would pre-empt state rules and others.

Requiring companies to install one system to satisfy interim requirements and another later would be unfair, said Doug Schneider, a vice president of the World Shipping Council.

The American Waterways Operators, a trade association, said the rules would require tugboat, towboat and barge operators to buy "extremely expensive ballast water treatment systems that have never, to our knowledge, been deployed effectively or even tested on such vessels."

Cargo haulers that operate only on the Great Lakes said they shouldn't have to sterilize ballast because they don't bring invaders to U.S. waters.

"Once an exotic gets established in the lakes, it's here to stay whether or not it gets into our ballast tanks," said Glen Nekvasil, spokesman for the Lake Carriers Association.

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