Testimony of the American Sportfishing Association
On the Growing Problem of Invasive Asian Carp in the Great Lakes and Mississippi River System
House Resource Committee Subcommittee on Fisheries and Oceans
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Mr. Chairman, and members of the subcommittee, my name is Gordon Robertson. I am Vice President of the American Sportfishing Association (ASA). The ASA is the leading recreational fishing trade association. Our membership of over 700 companies, organizations, and agencies includes members of the sportfishing and boating industries, state fish and wildlife agencies, federal land and water management agencies, conservation organizations, angler advocacy groups and the outdoor media.

Sportfishing represents a $116 billion-a-year impact to our nation's economy. This is an especially important industry for the Great Lakes and Mississippi River basin regions, representing an annual economic impact of $7.3 billion from the Great Lakes alone. Unfortunately, the impact of invasive Asian carp on these systems presents a major threat to healthy fisheries in these states. Each of the five species (common, black, silver, bighead and grass) lends their own specific problems to these fisheries.

Asian carp are known as voracious consumers, capable of quickly overtaking ecosystems from established populations of commercially and recreationally valuable species. Such invasions can have significant impacts on valuable fisheries to the point of virtually eliminating them. Even though they are a relatively recent introduction in many systems, they have shown an affinity for becoming the dominant large fish species over more desirable species that are native or established fish that are recreationally and economically important. They are extremely efficient filter feeders, out competing native species including a wide variety of freshwater mollusks, paddlefish, bigmouth buffalo and larval fishes for algae, zooplankton, and aquatic insects. This can create a bottom-up disruption of the entire food chain which ultimately can impact populations of recreationally and economically important sportfish such as walleye, small and largemouth bass, yellow perch and other pan fish. Displacement of native fish, including game fish, could cost regions of the country billions of dollars and could devastate communities whose economy is water-based and sportfishing oriented.

Take, for example, grass carp. Though potentially a valuable management tool on small impoundments, they have been known to completely eliminate all vegetation in lakes and ponds they inhabit. Once all plant matter is gone, they then turn to eating

detritus and animal matter. While grass carp are intentionally stocked in a sterile, triploid state, some of these fish have been documented as reproducing. This is likely due to the difficulty in distinguishing between sterile and viable individuals, as well as the less than 100 percent effectiveness of the sterilization process.

Silver carp, in addition to the ecological problems they are capable of causing, can present a safety hazard to boaters. Silver carp are known to leap out of the water as motorboats pass. These leaping fish, which can weigh in excess of 50 pounds, occasionally hit moving boats and/or damage equipment when landing in boats. This problem becomes magnified even more when considering other recreational activities such as waterskiing or personal watercraft.

While common carp have been established in U.S. waters for over a hundred years, its newer cousins were introduced within the last 35 years, reproducing in U.S. waterways during the last 25 years. Each year there are increases in the number of individuals from each of these species found by researchers and state and federal fishery managers. Their numbers are clearly growing creating the potential for a significant negative biological, recreational and economic impact.

Control efforts have been limited. Most state fish and wildlife agencies require permits for individuals to import and posses these fish, however; a broader, more coordinated effort is required to prevent their sale and importation, as well as their release. Controls of these fish do not easily fit common management schemes. They are not sought as a sport fish so even an unlimited season and creel limit do not impact their numbers and their commercial appeal is limited.

Because of threats to recreational fishing from aquatic invasive species such as Asian carp, the ASA supports the passage of comprehensive aquatic invasive species legislation, such as S. 770 and H.R. 1591/1592. These bills are the most comprehensive because they address all aspects of the invasive species problem and set strong, yet attainable guidelines for prevention. In the case of invasive species, an ounce of prevention definitely outweighs a pound of response after an invasion. Once nuisance species have become established, they are usually impossible to control, let alone eradicate.

It is important to note that any new legislation should make the distinction between non-native and invasive species. There are many non-injurious, high-value species that should not be subject to removal because of invasive species legislation. Often recognized as game fish, these species were many times the result of planned introductions by state fish and wildlife agencies and have established themselves without significant disruptions to their surroundings. To legislatively cause the removal of such species would waste resources that could be used on actual invasive species as well as harming local economies dependent on these recreationally and economically important introduced fisheries.

One option suggested to combat Asian carp invasions is to list them under the Lacey Act as injurious species. While this would establish prohibitions for transporting these species of fish across state borders, it is not the comprehensive, proactive legislation required that allows a rapid response. The complications involved with this would prove to be much more cumbersome than would comprehensive aquatic invasive legislation that is based on prevention.

History repeats itself and we have not always learned from its lessons. The Lacey Act, passed in 1900, to prohibit the interstate commerce of illegally killed game, has already been used as a tool in the invasive species battle – with a purposeful exemption of English sparrows from the Act (brought to the U.S. in the 1850s). As a matter of fact the 1885 founding of the federal Bureau of Biological Survey had as one its purposes the control of the English sparrow.

By the middle of the 20th century fish and wildlife managers had already determined that the best way to control an invasive species was to carefully study the impacts of its potential importation and determine its suitability. At the time many imported species were brought to the U.S. as introductions of resource management agencies. Successes such as the Hungarian partridge, ring neck pheasant and brown trout had already been established, but regrettable introductions such as the 1882 release of carp by the state of Oregon were already an indicator of what could occur.

Today, the challenge is not with resource agency releases, but introductions ancillary to world trade that moves products globally at a rate not envisioned when the Lacey Act was passed in 1900. The same ingredients of today's world trade make it possible for individuals to obtain species for pets, food and other uses with relative ease (for example, if you search for Asian carp on an Internet search engine you will find articles about the problems of Asian carp as well as sites from which to order them). When purchasers find them inconvenient, they simply release them, greatly enhancing the potential of successful reproduction and invasion.

One successful model, established in the 1950s, for combating invasive species is the response to sea lampreys in the Great Lakes. This past June marked the 50th anniversary of the control of the damaging species. Through the work of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, populations of this problem species, originally introduced through shipping canals, have been reduced by 90% in most areas of the Great Lakes. Sea lamprey control consists of multiple facets, including assessment, lampricides, barriers, traps, and sterile-male releases. To date, the commission has spent more than $250 million combating sea lampreys. This does not take into account the costs to anglers and commercial fishers in lost fishing opportunities. The sea lamprey battle demonstrates that once an invasive species is established, it takes persistent and extensive measures to control it. This type of approach also provides a strong example of how current populations of Asian carp should be dealt with in the Mississippi River drainage. While there are obvious differences in the biology of these species, using more than one method of control can greatly improve success.

Ironically, until provisions of the clean water act restored the water quality in the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, there was no viable biological link between the Mississippi River drainage and the Great Lakes. With a toxic zone in the canal virtually eliminating any possibility of living organisms making the journey, there were no invasions via this pathway. As the waters became cleaner, however, the threat of invasions to or from the Great Lakes was suddenly real. To prevent movement of invasive species, an electrical barrier was placed in the canal that is designed to deter migration from one system to another. This barrier was originally designed for exclusion of the round goby.

The electric barrier on the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal should continue to be operated and studied for any possible improvements to its effectiveness. If additional improvements or new measures can be made that can prevent Asian carp from moving out of the Canal and into Lake Michigan, they would be well worth the additional costs in comparison to the potential impacts of an invasion. As we have learned from the sea lamprey, it takes several types of actions at many locations to successfully control a tenacious invasive species. Certainly, the existing experimental barrier should be made permanent and the second barrier—currently under construction—should be completed. Both barriers should continue to be operated

In conclusion, it is extremely important that we continue to monitor the status of Asian carp invasions and seek methods to control them. To control Asian carp, however; we must address the larger problem of all invasive species. Passage of comprehensive aquatic invasive species legislation would help give fishery managers the tools needed to effectively combat such problems. Such legislation needs to address the coordination of efforts on several fronts: state authorities; federal authorities, international compacts and treaties and the several industries that move live organisms around the world in the various trades ranging from agriculture to shipping.

Faced with the specter of Asian carp in the Great Lakes, we must use all available tools to prevent future invasions as well as try to bring established populations of these fishes under control.

The American Sportfishing Association will continue to work constructively on this important issue.