

Regional Collaboration Offers Strategy for Curbing Aquatic Invasive Species

By Ted Lawrence, Communications and Policy Associate, Great Lakes Fishery Commission (2004-2005 Sea Grant Fellow, Great Lakes Commission)

Collaboration is essential to ecosystem management. The vast natural resource known as the Great Lakes is shared by two nations, eight states, two provinces, many tribes, numerous municipalities and a diverse group of stakeholders. Collaboration within such a region can be politically complex, and may lose legitimacy and effectiveness when only a limited number of stakeholders are involved.

As awareness has grown of the Great Lakes as a national treasure-at-risk, so has recognition of the value of collaboration. This is reflected by a May 2004 Presidential Executive Order establishing the historic basin-wide initiative, the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration (GLRC). The Collaboration was convened December 2004 in Chicago by the federal Great Lakes Interagency Task Force, the Council of Great Lakes Governors, the Great Lakes Cities Initiative, Great Lakes tribes and the Great Lakes Congressional Task Force.

Unique among Great Lakes collaborations, the GLRC has made an unprecedented effort to be all-inclusive, working within a very short time frame, to engage stakeholders from the general public and commercial, recreational and governmental interests, while having political support from the U.S. administration. Taking a holistic approach to the region's ecological, economic, and social concerns, the GLRC established eight issue-area strategy teams based on the key environmental priorities designated by the Council of Great Lakes Governors, including one to address aquatic invasive species (AIS).

The AIS Strategy Team was charged with developing an action plan to stop the introduction and spread of non-native aquatic invasive species into the Great Lakes. It was co-chaired by Gerry Jackson, assistant regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Fisheries Division; Dr. Chris Goddard, executive secretary of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission; and Ken DeBeaussaert, director of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality's Office of the Great Lakes.

The team addressed a wide-range of issues, including ballast water management; implementation of the Nonindigenous Aquatic Nuisance Prevention and Control Act of 1990, Public Law 101-646 (NANPCA); Asian carp barriers and related issues; rapid response; prevention and mitigation; outreach and education; applied research; among others. Under guidance of the co-chairs, development of the AIS action plan was divided into five sections, each addressing one of the primary vectors identified as accountable for Great Lakes aquatic invasions. These are aquaculture, maritime commerce, canals and waterways, organisms in trade, and recreational activities. Drafting teams developed reports on each of the five vectors that included problem statements, performance-based goals and objectives, ongoing efforts, and recommended actions and strategies.

The Process

The AIS Strategy Team produced a comprehensive five-page action plan based on the drafting team reports with the primary goal of preventing "all new introductions of AIS into the Great Lakes." A secondary goal focuses on stopping, extirpating, and/or controlling harmful AIS populations to levels that "ensure sustainable ecosystems and the social, economic and cultural uses they support." The document continues with five primary actions and sub-actions, and a rationale for each of these elements.

The aquatic invasive species section of the GLRC draft action plan is available online for peer review and public comment from July 7 through Sept. 9, 2005 (see www.gllrc.us/), after which it will be synthesized into a comprehensive Great Lakes strategy for use at the discretion of Congress and the president.

The Great Lakes Panel on Aquatic Nuisance Species

The AIS Strategy Team benefited from a high level of participation by members of the Great Lakes Panel on Aquatic Nuisance Species. The AIS Team utilized Panel documents and had a responsive network of public and private stakeholders in the Great Lakes region, allowing the team to develop a comprehensive and focused action plan.

“We covered a lot of ground and came up with clear recommended actions,” said DeBeaussaert. “What we have is a powerful statement of the needs and directions for protection and restoration of the Great Lakes related to aquatic invasive species.”

Dr. Roger Eberhardt, chair of the Great Lakes Panel on Aquatic Nuisance Species added, “The fact that so much was accomplished so quickly was due in part to the groundwork of communications, networking, and actions laid out by the Panel over the last few years.”

The Great Lakes Panel met in Ann Arbor, Mich. in April 2005, holding a formal session on the ideology and concepts driving the Regional Collaboration as related to the AIS issue. In a symbiotic relationship, Great Lakes Panel members participating in development of the AIS section of the GLRC action plan will have the opportunity to use this guidance in their work on the Panel. As can be seen from these efforts, collaboration begets collaboration.

“The Great Lakes Regional Collaboration’s recommended actions will provide a vision for the Great Lakes Panel and its committees to proceed with their charge under NANPCA,” Eberhardt continued. “This will add weight to the importance, continuity, and legitimacy of previous and ongoing efforts to protect and restore the ecological and economic health of the Great Lakes resource.”

Legitimacy of the Great Lakes Collaborative Process

The final document of the AIS Strategy Team was combined with the documents of the other seven strategy teams in April 2005. In October 2005, the AIS Strategy team convened in Rochester, N.Y. to incorporate public comment and fully develop the team’s top five recommendations to be immediately addressed by the administration. With the integration of public review comments, the entire document, *Great Lakes Regional Collaboration: A Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes* will then be presented to the administration in December 2005, where participants of the collaboration will offer it as a road map to direct more funding into the region to accomplish the consensus-based goals.

“If we implement the final recommendations developed by this team, then we will be successful at eliminating new species invasions and controlling populations of the most ecologically and economically damaging invasive species in the Great Lakes basin,” said Jackson. “The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service looks forward to helping implement the final Strategy.”

Goddard added “It is the expectation of participants in this Collaboration, that the outcome of this exercise will guide, or become, the U.S. Administration’s policy on Great Lakes issues.”

Over the past three decades, the Great Lakes Commission, its many partners and other regional entities have been working to develop comprehensive strategies to restore and protect the Great Lakes freshwater resource. Said Tom Crane, interim director of the Great Lakes Commission, "The collaborative process driving the GRLC will enhance the work that the Great Lakes Commission and its partners have pursued over the years; we are proud to be partaking in this collective effort to better the Great Lakes resource."

The Regional Collaboration process has further advanced the efforts of Great Lakes entities, bringing these important issues to the forefront of the U.S. administration's political agenda. The Regional Collaboration has bred a new legitimacy by pursuing the development of a basin-wide dialogue between the major Great Lakes stakeholders.

Ted Lawrence held the 2004-2005 NOAA Sea Grant Fellowship at the Great Lakes Commission where he worked with Kathe Glassner-Shwayder in providing support for the Great Lakes Panel on Aquatic Nuisance Species. Upon completion of his fellowship in May, 2005, Ted moved to the Great Lakes Fishery Commission where he is working with Marc Gaden as their Communications and Policy Associate.