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Deadly fish virus spreading west

A deadly fish virus that already is wreaking havoc in the eastern Great Lakes is spreading west and could one day reach Lake Superior, where it could have potentially devastating effects on Minnesota's fisheries.

Doug Smith

★ A fatal fish virus that has caused large fish kills in the eastern Great Lakes is spreading west, and the next destination could be Lake Superior.

If it arrives there, it could spread to inland waters -- much as zebra mussels and other invasive species have -- with potentially devastating effects on Minnesota's fisheries.

"It's a major disaster waiting to happen," said Gary Glass of Duluth, an environmental activist and retired chemist with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

★ "Once it's established here, it will go up the inland waters and down the Mississippi," said Glass.

"It's a big deal," agreed Ron Payer, fisheries chief for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. "We're concerned."

★ The virus, called viral hemorrhagic septicemia or VHS, is believed to have spread to the Great Lakes via the ballast of ships. Last year alone it caused large fish kills in Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, Lake Huron and Lake St. Clair and other waterways. It killed a variety of fish, including muskies, walleyes, bass, perch and freshwater drum.

VHS has been called the "Ebola for fish" because it causes them to hemorrhage, killing them, much as the Ebola virus has killed humans in Africa. It has spread from east to west; the latest confirmations came early this year from northern Lake Huron, just 20 miles from Lake Michigan and not far from the locks at Sault Ste. Marie that lead to Lake Superior.

★ "We know we can't keep it out of Lake Michigan," said Gary Whelan, fish production manager at the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

"Not only is it spreading in Great Lakes waters, but we have real concerns it will spread to inland waters," he said.

★ But officials simply don't know how the disease will play out or how it will affect fisheries.

★ "It's unlikely to kill every fish," Whelan said. "It could kill a percentage of fish and

then move on." It also could kill young fish, suppressing populations.

Whelan said officials estimated 2,000 to 4,000 large muskies died from the disease last year in Lake St. Clair, where the muskie population is estimated at 100,000.

There's a lot at stake, for anglers, aquaculture and the bait industry in all the states that border the Great Lakes, and Canada.

"Our sports fisheries is worth about \$1.5 billion a year," Whelan said. "Our Great Lakes fishery is about 40 percent of that." The impact of Great Lakes and commercial fishing in the U.S. has been estimated at \$4 billion.

Another concern, Whelan said, is if VHS infects fish hatcheries.

"You may be destroying everything that's in it," he said.

Michigan has passed legislation restricting the release of ballast water in state waters.

"We hope other states follow suit, since the federal government hasn't moved fast on this issue," Whelan said.

That's exactly what Glass wants -- immediate action. He and Dave Zentner, also of Duluth, are members of the Izaak Walton League of America. Their chapter has asked state officials to do something before it's too late.

"If we allow it to spread to the Twin Ports, the entire St. Louis River estuary will be a hot zone, from which the disease will spread across the state," Zentner, chapter director, wrote to state officials.

Glass and Zentner want officials to require that all ballast be treated to kill any invasive hitchhikers. And with the Duluth-Superior port soon to open, they are frustrated with the lack of action.

"We're out of patience," Zentner said.

Glass said a relatively easy and cheap fix would be to require chlorine treatment of ballast.

Rep. James Oberstar, D-Minn., said Tuesday he intends to introduce legislation in Congress that would address the ballast issue. And chances of passage are good, he said. But it likely will take a couple of years to implement.

That's time Glass and Zentner say Lake Superior -- and Minnesota -- doesn't have.

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Deadly Fish Virus Spreading West: Article from the Star Tribune

1. The focus of this news story is the entrance of viral hemorrhagic septecimia into inland lakes and waterways. This virus is able to kill vast amounts of fish and spread through waterways. Its source is from ballast water of ships being released.
2. This story relates to fish ecology because it deals with the health of fish species and populations that may be wiped out due to a viral outbreak.
3. Humans are the environmental activists, shipping industry, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, anglers, aquaculture, bait industries, government officials and the Izaak Walton Leage of America. Nonhuman players are the fish, the river systems and the ships with ballast water.
4. Socioeconomic issues in this article include the following: anthropogenic impacts on fish, the affect of industry on environmental health and the a possible downturn in aquaculture and bait industries that could harm the economic value of the region
5. This seems accurate and unbiased due to the factual nature of the article.
6. Recruitment rates, migration, general knowledge of fish habitat, resistance capabilities and general management would help in this situation.
7. A fish ecologist could possibly track the movement of the virus, find ways to test fish for the virus and create keep a fish stockpile in a fishery for later release or find ways to inoculate fish. Unfortunately at this point officials believe there is nothing to do but sit back and wait.