

Invasive Species

ALASKA



Finding Solutions: Protecting Our Nation's Waters – The National Aquatic Invasive Species Act (NAISA)

Congress is now considering the National Aquatic Invasive Species Act (NAISA), which builds on past legislation. As of November 2003, several subcommittees and committees in both the House and the Senate are still considering the bill.

When ships arrive from foreign ports and empty their ballast water in Alaska's waters, they are potentially introducing thousands of alien organisms. Since its passage in 1990, a single law has been the nation's chief protection against such new aquatic invasions and especially those that arrive in ballast water. That law—the National Aquatic Nuisance Prevention and Control Act (NANPCA)—was revised and reauthorized in 1996 and Congress is considering a second revision now. As state officials give more attention to problems associated with aquatic and other invaders, they estimate that the costs of preventing economic and environmental harm will be substantial. The proposed revision would provide new tools for the work they are undertaking and strengthen the use of existing ones.

Congress passed NANPCA in 1990 in response to the invasion of the zebra mussel and other species that damaged the Great Lakes. The new law brought much-needed attention to the global movement of aquatic species. It also established the federal interagency Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force, which became a key resource for regional and state efforts. NANPCA's strictest and most detailed provi-

sions required that ships headed for the Great Lakes exchange their ballast water at sea.

The law was reauthorized in 1996, renamed the National Invasive Species Act, or NISA, and expanded slightly. NISA encourages all ships arriving from outside the 200-mile US Exclusive Economic Zone to exchange their ballast water, but requires them to report whether they have. NISA also authorized important research and linked its results to decisions about whether further ballast water regulation would be needed.

NISA has a number of features that help states like Alaska:

- The law established an Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force that, in turn, set up regional groups to share information and develop cooperative plans. Alaska is a member of the Western Regional Panel, formed in 1997. Membership gives access to a wealth of information on species like the European green crab, connects experts to a system of committees on specific topics and species, and provides a forum for discussing the latest research and common policy concerns.
- The law promotes the use of comprehensive state management plans by providing federal funds (up to 75 percent) for implementing such Task Force-approved plans. States have successfully used these plans to identify their worst problems and to marshal the resources to address them. The Task Force approved Alaska's official state aquatic invasive species management plan on November 15, 2002.

Despite its successes, NISA has considerable room for improvement. Federal agencies have ignored important provisions; the law neglects important pathways of introduc-



© 2000 – Scott McGuire



Tourism is one of Alaska's most lucrative businesses, and is heavily dependent on healthy ecosystems and abundant native wildlife.

tion other than ballast water; all the nation's waters deserve protection equal to the Great Lakes'; and reliance on ballast water exchange to reduce organisms in ballast water doesn't work—even in the Great Lakes where exchange is mandatory.

NISA expired in September 2002, so Congress must reauthorize the law. This is an opportunity to address NISA's shortcomings. Alaska would be a major beneficiary of these improvements.

How can strengthened national aquatic invasive species legislation help Alaskans?

A broad group of stakeholders has been working with members of Congress for months to draft and revise a stronger version of NISA, titled the National Aquatic Invasive Species Act (NAISA). Generally, it extends protections to all US waters, including inland ones, and authorizes additional federal work in key areas: identifying and limiting the riskiest pathways of aquatic introductions; monitoring to detect invasive species new to the United States; and providing the means to respond quickly to such newcomers.

Much of the focus remains on ships' management of ballast water and on strengthening NISA's related provisions. For example, the many ships that travel Alaska's coast would be required to manage their ballast water in specific ways for the first time, including ships making trips within Alaska. The proposed bill also requires that ships eventually meet objective standards for reducing the number of organisms released along with ballast water discharges.

Like the 1996 law, the new bill would provide federal cost sharing up to 75 percent for states to implement aquatic invasive species management plans, but in the new bill, states could also receive federal matching funds to expand their management plans.

In addition, the bill authorizes the Task Force to increase its spending—from \$4 million to \$30 million—on state

grants. In Alaska, where officials estimate that implementing the state aquatic nuisance species management plan will cost up to \$713,500 per year, these changes should give the state greater access to federal funds.

Also, the bill lays out a timetable and a process for developing a program to evaluate, or "screen," first-time intentional introductions of species. The public often assumes that this is routinely done before species are allowed into the country. In fact, this would be the first instance that federal officials have attempted such an approach. Some of Alaska's worst invasive species were intentional imports. By more carefully weighing species' risks before they enter the country, the bill's new provisions would help prevent additional invaders. NAISA also instructs the National Science Foundation to establish a grants program to study systematics and taxonomy. This could be a boon for Alaska, where many organisms are as yet unstudied.

What's at Risk?

Alaska has vast waterways that can be protected with stronger legislation:

- Alaska has 6,640 miles of open ocean coastline and, counting islands, almost 34,000 miles of shoreline—more than one-third of the nation's coastal areas.
- Alaska has more than 3,000 rivers and three million lakes of more than 20 acres. The Yukon River is the United States' third longest.

Alaskan industries rely upon healthy ecosystems:

- **FISHING:** Almost 55 percent of US seafood production comes from Alaska's waters, nearly four times more than the next largest state. In 2001, commercial harvests of all fish and shellfish were worth \$871 million.
- **TOURISM:** Tourism provides almost 17,000 direct jobs for Alaskans, more than 1.5 times the number employed in Alaska's petroleum and mining industries combined.



Union of Concerned Scientists

Citizens and Scientists for Environmental Solutions

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
Two Brattle Square
Cambridge, MA 02238-9105
Phone: 617-547-5552
Toll Free: 1-800-666-8276
Fax: 617-864-9405

WASHINGTON OFFICE
1707 H Street, NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20006-3962
Phone: 202-223-6133
Fax: 202-223-6162