

# The Herald-News: Is Brandon Road Lock and Dam wall in Joliet a feasible Asian Carp solution?

ft # e

Washington, December 14, 2017 | [0 comments](#)

*There's a proposed wall that several State's officials would like to see built and likely will be part of a congressional and national debate in 2019.*

## IS BRANDON ROAD LOCK AND DAM WALL IN JOLIET A FEASIBLE ASIAN CARP SOLUTION?

By JON STYF - [jstyf@shawmedia.com](mailto:jstyf@shawmedia.com)

There's a proposed wall that several State's officials would like to see built and likely will be part of a congressional and national debate in 2019.

This wall is proposed for Joliet, with a \$5.9 million price tag, to close down the lock at the Brandon Road Lock and Dam.

It's not a new discussion on an issue that has history dating back to the Chicago River reversal in 1900, which created the shipping canal connection between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River, and the importation of the Asian carp species to Arkansas fishing farms starting in the 1970s.

Those fish escaped a Lake of the Ozarks farm during 1994 flooding, reached the Mississippi River and now the fight continues to keep the invasive species from reaching the Great Lakes.

Many solutions to the problem are available, some more likely and more expensive than others. All sides, however, would like to see the fish halt their advance.

There are clear sides and plenty of money at stake on each, with the shipping industry relying on the channel remaining open while other states' fishing industries remain at stake if the carp reach the Great Lakes.

There are ecological considerations, monetary considerations and special interest considerations.

Michigan has a long history of fighting to block the shipping canal to protect its portion of the estimated \$7 billion of Great Lakes commercial, recreational and tribal fisheries, supportive of more than 75,000 jobs, according to the Great Lakes Fishery Commission.

There has been an appeal to the Supreme Court, a multistate lobbying campaign in 2011 and a rumored budget bill back in 2014.

"It's easy sitting in Michigan to say we need to shut down the waterways," said U.S. Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Channahon. Kinzinger said he often can see the electric boats targeting the fish from his office in Ottawa. "But the electric barrier seems to be doing its job."

Michigan's attorney general sent a letter, also signed by attorneys general from Minnesota and Pennsylvania, to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers asking for the wall to be built.

“It is time that a permanent and effective solution be implemented to prevent the spread of this invasive species,” Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette said in a news release. “The Great Lakes are the crown jewel of the Midwest, and the potential damage both environmentally and economically from Asian carp is too great to risk, which is why we have asked the corps to close the Brandon Road lock.”

On the other side are Illinois’ lawmakers and industry. Businesses rely on the canal to ship commodities – everything from road salt headed to Chicago to chemicals, petroleum, aggregates, metals and agricultural products – that head both directions through the locks. If they didn’t move by barge, some of those commodities wouldn’t move through Will County, while others would move on trucks or trains.

“I don’t think anyone who lives in our area wants anymore trucks on the road or to be stuck at more railroad crossings,” said Rep. Dan Lipinski, D-Western Springs, whose 3rd District includes Homer Glen, Lemont, Lockport and Romeoville.

The cost of the wall to the shipping industry was estimated in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ draft proposal for fixing the Brandon Road Lock and Dam system as \$318.7 million in costs associated with changing the mode of transportation for the freight.

That inevitably would lead to more truck traffic in the already-saturated areas of the current highway system.

Both sides believe the other’s numbers are inflated, and Schuette, a Republican running for governor, commissioned a study dated Nov. 13 to show it. He sent that to the Army Corps of Engineers along with the letter, also signed by Minnesota and Pennsylvania’s attorneys general.

Schuette’s report shows that although shipping methods will have to change, industry is expected to adjust in ways that will keep the costs far lower than estimated.

“This overstatement of costs is due both to the unrealistically high traffic assumptions made by the corps and alternative overland route cost estimates that are implausible and would not occur in the real world,” said the study, co-authored by Wayne State University (Detroit) Marketing and Supply Chain Management chairman John C. Taylor and JLRoach Inc. President James L. Roach.

On the other side, the Illinois Chamber of Commerce produced its own letter to the Army Corps of Engineers advocating for an increase in funding for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources’ harvesting program and putting a larger lock system in place for the benefit of shippers.

Kevin Irons, IDNR Aquaculture and Aquatic Nuisance Species program manager, said that the biomass of carp in the river area south of Channahon is down 68 percent, based on a study from 2012 to 2014, as well as that those numbers have been maintained.

“But if you stop doing that aggressive work with contracted commercial fishermen, that could change quickly,” Irons said. “It’s no secret we found a silver carp in 2017 above the barrier and also in 2010. We don’t know how those fish got there.”

But Irons is confident the current plan can stop the migration and the next step is to move more aggressively downstream, because that’s where the carp breaching the locks would come from.

“There’s six times more fish down there,” Irons said.

A study earlier this year from the U.S. Geological Survey showed that if Asian carp reached the Great Lakes, they wouldn't disperse randomly but instead would migrate to coastal areas, where they would find an adequate supply of floating green algae and blue-green algae, and the right temperatures to sustain.

That would mean a large disruption to the near-shore fisheries in places such as Michigan. The fish are "filter feeders" that vacuum up to 20 percent of their body weight in plankton a day, affecting the bottom of the food chain that young and small fish rely on.

Cost also is a large problem, for any of the plans, which is an argument made by the three attorneys general in their letter. Instead of a large spend, the

\$5.9 million concrete wall in Joliet would be a cost-effective solution for them.

Ben Brockschmidt, vice president of policy for the Illinois Chamber, argued against Illinois businesses and taxpayers footing the bill since the origin of the Asian carp problem actually was fish farms in Arkansas, which imported the fish in the 1970s and '80s, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services. A 1994 flood in Missouri allowed the fish to escape a Lake of the Ozarks pond into a nearby river, and the carp spread from there.

Although the wall is a one-time cost, the corps' proposal will be a continuing cost.

"If you look at the scope over 50 years, doing the math quickly, it's not just \$275 million – it's \$1.3 billion as it's currently written," Irons told The Herald-News after the study was released.

Those costs make Kinzinger skeptical of the multifaceted solution.

"I think it's unrealistic because they're going to want to have Illinois pay a significant portion of it," he said.

An estimated 107.8 million tons of freight was shipped over Illinois waterways in 2014, the most recent year data was available, according to the draft version of the Illinois Department of Transportation Freight Plan, released in October.

It's a low-cost way to ship low-cost commodities and is estimated to bring \$6.4 million and 50,000 jobs into the Illinois economy.

According to the Brandon Road lock data cited in the AGs report, traffic has steadily declined from 17.8 million tons shipped on 11,038 barges through the locks in 2006 to 11.2 million tons on 6,634 barges in 2016.

Of that cargo, 2.4 million tons were iron and steel, 1.7 million tons were coal, 1.6 million tons were petroleum, 1.4 million tons were aggregates and 1.3 million tons were chemicals on average between 2012 to 2014.

The report also said that estimates of freight shipped through the Brandon Road lock in the future – in the 12 million-tons-a-year range from 2020 to 2040 – was too high, especially with the changes in the energy world.

It argued reality will be more in the 10 million-ton range. When the NRG Romeoville power plant fully closes in May 2018, that will affect traffic as well, the report said.

Brockschmidt said he has spent the past 10 years working on the carp/shipping issue, including being part of the Great Lakes Commission.

The Chamber wants to see a new 1,200-foot lock built at Brandon Road. Modern shipping uses 15-barge tows, the Illinois Chamber's letter to the corps said. That means they must be broken down into two tows to make it through the current 600-foot lock, a safety issue for the barge crews unrelated to the carp issue.

He said that the estimates for shipping the equivalent of a 15-barge tow in a different fashion would mean filling about 216 railcars or adding 1,050 more trucks to the roadways. "I still can't understand, from a practical standpoint, how (closing the lock) is the right approach," Brockschmidt said. "It certainly makes it more difficult for the businesses in Illinois."

In August, the Army Corps of Engineers released its recommendation of a \$275 million proposal for several carp-deterring features, including a package of noise generation, an electric barrier, an engineered channel, a flushing lock and water jets that it believes will decrease the likelihood of a Lake Michigan carp invasion from 36 to 15 percent.

That's in addition to the electric barrier currently in place near Romeoville.

When the draft proposal was submitted, the corps asked for feedback, which led to the recent letters. It came after Michigan lawmakers banded together in late June to push for an early release of the study.

The last time this was proposed, in late 2014, Lipinski and other congressmen caught wind that Michigan legislators would attempt to tack on a measure to block the Brandon Road lock to an omnibus spending bill, essentially a bill filled with different topics that's voted on collectively.

In response, Lipinski and fellow local Illinois congressmen such as Kinzinger, Bill Foster and Randy Hultgren were part of a 17-member group to sign a letter sent to House Speaker John Boehner and Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi opposing the measure. Foster, D-Naperville, said in a statement sent to The Herald-News that he looks forward to seeing the Army Corps of Engineers' full report no later than February 2019.

Lipinski confirmed that timeline, saying he spoke with the corps about the topic within the past few weeks and believes any work on the matter won't begin until at least 2019. Kinzinger said the project would then take five years to complete.

"I think we need to continue to double down on the things that are working right now," said Kinzinger, who said this topic has been an issue of concern since he entered office and seems to be getting less attention now than in the past. "We need to make sure we don't impact our economic mobility."

When the corps' final report is filed, that debate will begin again. Michigan will have its side, Illinois will have its side and the corps will have its proposed plan options.

One that Lipinski has heard that wasn't included the corps' draft plan was chlorinating the water in the lock area so that the fish cannot pass.

What's ultimately decided will be up to lawmakers then.

"Right now, have electric barriers in the water, which have so far been successful," Lipinski said. "... This is not something that has been an emergency."