

Seaway's 50th anniversary soiled by invasive species

June 26 2009, By Dan Egan

Fifty years ago Friday, President Dwight Eisenhower and Britain's Queen Elizabeth II walked down a red carpet, climbed aboard a "floating palace" of a yacht named Britannia and ceremoniously sailed through the St. Lambert lock near Montreal to hail the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway.

The \$470 million system of channels, locks and dams was built to open the [Great Lakes](#) to the rest of the world.

And it did, for better and for worse.

The Seaway has turned out to be something of a boutique regional transportation route for two primary commodities, inbound foreign steel and outbound domestic grain.

Yet, opening the once-isolated freshwater lakes to the rest of the world brought more than dollars. The invasive species that arrived with the foreign cargo have wrought ecological and economic chaos.

Zebra and quagga mussels are only two of about 60 foreign species that have arrived as hitchhikers aboard oceangoing vessels since the Seaway opened. And these little mollusks alone have cost us billions of dollars by plugging industrial water intakes, starving fish populations and triggering algae outbreaks that have trashed treasured shorelines.

"The damage invasive species have caused to the Great Lakes is

astounding," said Dennis Schornack, former U.S. chair of the International Joint Commission. "But, what's most frustrating is that we still haven't closed this door."

A coalition of 50 organizations is marking Friday's anniversary with a renewed demand for changes in the shipping industry to protect the world's largest freshwater system. It has outlined seven principles it wants the industry to embrace in the coming years.

The principles call on the industry to stop dumping its biological pollution in our harbors, drop any designs to expand the Seaway, minimize its ice-breaking activities in sensitive areas and reduce air emissions, among other things.

Conservationists point to President Barack Obama's plan to pump new dollars into Great Lakes restoration efforts as reason to lean on the shipping industry to do more to protect the lakes.

"If the Obama administration is going to be investing nearly a half-billion dollars into restoration in the next year, then we have to ensure that shipping doesn't undo all that," said Jennifer Nalbone of the conservation group Great Lakes United.

Seaway operators note that they have tightened the rules in recent years to throttle the onslaught of invaders. They point to the fact that all inbound ocean vessels are now required to flush their ship-steadying ballast tanks with mid-ocean saltwater in an attempt to kill any potential freshwater invaders.

Scientists say the practice goes a long way -- but by no means all the way -- in protecting the Great Lakes from the next unwanted species.

While the oceangoing vessels account for only a sliver of the cargo

moved on the Great Lakes today -- over 90 percent of the traffic consists of bulk cargo such as iron ore and coal moving from one Great Lakes port to another -- they are responsible for the majority of new biological invasions.

The lakes are now home to more than 185 non-native species. In the past nine years, a new species has been discovered, on average, about every eight months -- among the latest being a tiny red shrimp found in Lake Michigan in late 2006.

Conservationists want federal legislation requiring ship owners to install ballast tank treatment systems to kill freshwater invaders, though Congress has been working unsuccessfully on the issue for years.

Frustrated by the inaction, Great Lakes states have begun taking matters into their own hands. Michigan and New York have passed their own ballast regulations, which have successfully withstood legal action from the shipping industry.

Wisconsin is pondering its own ballast regulations, despite cries from the shipping community of the damage it will do.

Fifty years ago, nobody was talking about damage. They were thrilled about the prospect of cities such as Milwaukee and Duluth becoming big-time ports rivaling those on the coasts.

"When Britannia reaches that gate, when the rockets fire, the balloons go up and we hear the ringing of the church bells ... it will mark realization of a wonderful dream," proclaimed a newsman in archival footage provided by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. "This is a moment to look ahead."

But today a lot of conservationists are looking back.

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