

# Project to block Asian carp from entering Lake Michigan moves forward

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

It's not good news for some of the most foreboding fish in Illinois swimming their way toward Lake Michigan.

The next phase of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' project for the Brandon Road Lock and Dam near Joliet is moving ahead after state and [federal funding](#) has been secured. The project aims to block out some particularly prolific species of invasive carp that could destroy the balance of the Great Lakes ecosystem and eat their way through the region's \$7 billion fishing industry.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan and Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker last month pledged to work together to keep out the invasive carp. Illinois signed on to fund about a third of the estimated \$28 million pre-construction engineering and design phase of the Brandon Road project. Michigan offered Illinois up to \$8 million and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources will contribute the other \$2.5 million. Federal funds will cover the other two-thirds. The entire project is now estimated to cost \$858 million.

Loren Wobig, IDNR's office of water resources director, likened the Asian carp effort to the strong offense and defense needed on a football team. Commercial fishing to rid waterways of the carp as well as monitoring efforts are part of the offense, he said. The electrical barriers that have been in place for years at Romeoville help with defense.

"With Brandon Road, we're essentially adding a very successful linebacker to our defense," Wobig said.

This phase of the Brandon Road project is expected to take three to four years, and will include plotting out the many tasks ahead, securing the [construction site](#), implementing research data, and a lot of modeling, said Andrew Leichty, a project manager with the Army Corps.

"It's the phase here where we're getting ready and prepared to get to that first construction contract," Leichty said.

Among the technologies included in the recommended plan for the site: an electric barrier to deter and stun carp, underwater sound to scare them off, an air bubble curtain to turn around small fish that sneak along with barges, and a flushing lock to send larval fish and eggs downstream.

An engineered channel, which upped the costs of the project, will allow for more effective implementation of the technologies, including making it easier to clean out fish and debris. It also offers the potential to test new technology, Leichty said, such as carbon dioxide deterrence, which was not included in the feasibility plan but is being studied as another tool to steer away carp.

One of the challenges will be accommodating Illinois public waters law, Wobig said.

Once the pre-construction phase wraps up, construction could be completed in six to eight years, Leichty said, meaning a best case finish in 2030.

While Brandon Road progresses, the ongoing efforts to hold back the invasive carp will continue.

"We don't want carp knocking on the door of this new barrier anytime soon," said Kevin Irons, IDNR's assistant chief of fisheries.

The last big scare past the electric barriers at Romeoville came in 2017, when an 8-pound silver carp was found in the Little Calumet River, just 9 miles from the lake.

Silver carp, known for scaring easily at the sound of a boat engine and sometimes leaping feet into the air, and bighead carp, the nearly nonstop eaters that regularly reach 40 pounds and can top 100, continue to be the species of most concern. Asian carp were brought to the U.S. to clean up

algae blooms and nuisance vegetation, and flooding sent them into the Mississippi River basin, setting off years of proposals to keep them out of the Great Lakes.

The good news is the carp still haven't made major moves above I-55, Wobig said. And more than a million pounds of carp are removed from the river annually. The state also works with commercial fisherman in the Lower Illinois River near Peoria who get an extra 10 cents a pound on Asian carp and can take out a few additional million pounds.

There's been a more than 95% drop in the Dresden Island Pool population, about 47 miles from Lake Michigan, since 2012, Irons said.

"And we're going to continue doing this because if we were to stop, we would expect those numbers to rebound," Irons said.

As for Brandon Road, there really was no "plan B," said Marc Smith, policy director for the National Wildlife Federation.

"They're doing yeoman's work on the water throughout the year with the unified method of capturing carp," Smith said. "However, it's not enough. And that's where the political progress comes into play."

Reaching this phase of the Brandon Road project is years in the making, after other possibilities in a 2014 Army Corps study on stopping carp and aquatic invasives—such as an \$18 billion option of separating Lake Michigan from the river—were passed over. When Brandon Road became the preferred option, then-Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner's administration was hesitant in its support, questioning the costs and rejecting Michigan's \$8 million offer on his way out of office.

With state funding in place and inclusion on this year's Army Corps work plan, the pre-construction phase can begin. But before actual

construction starts, another agreement will need to be reached and more funds secured for the pricier part of the project, which requires 20% in nonfederal funding.

Some would like to see the federal government step in and cover the costs for cash-strapped Illinois.

"One hundred percent federal funding makes sense because you're talking about a threat to eight states and two provinces," said Molly Flanagan, chief operating officer for the Alliance for the Great Lakes.

Additionally, the technology tested for Brandon Road could be deployed throughout the country to curb aquatic invasive species, Flanagan said, leading to a national benefit.

Similarly, Smith said, "We've argued all along that Brandon Road really is a national response."

"It's been a long and bumpy [road](#) to get us to this point," Smith said. "But nevertheless we are here. And it's a huge step forward in the process."

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