MICRA Position Statement

Immediate action is needed to reduce overabundant populations of Asian carps, specifically bighead and silver carps, which have become established throughout much of the Mississippi River Basin. Uncontrolled populations of Asian carp are overwhelming native ecosystems and negatively affecting the multi-billion dollar[1] fishing and recreational boating industries, and the economies of communities dependent upon these industries. Over 56% of bait fish collected during a fishery survey below Kentucky and Barkley Lakes in 2010 were juvenile Asian carp. Asian carps comprised 55% of all reported fish harvested by commercial fishers from the Missouri River in Iowa during 2010. Biologists estimate there are approximately 13 tons of silver carp (or more than 4,100 fish) per mile in portions of the Illinois River (Sass et al. 2009).

Increased harvest is the only method likely to result in substantial lowering of Asian carp populations over the near term, and will likely be an important component of a long-term integrated management approach once new population reduction tools are developed (Conover et al. 2007). Modeling of bighead carp populations in the Illinois and Mississippi rivers indicates that sufficient harvest levels will reduce recruitment and adult abundance over the long-term (Hoff et al. 2011). Increased harvest is a desirable temporary approach to extirpate or reduce Asian carp abundance and is recommended as "a primary tool in the control of Asian carps" in the national Asian carp management and control plan (Strategy 3.3.2. *in* Conover et al. 2007).

Private industry is actively developing products, markets, and businesses to utilize Asian carps. Export markets for "wild caught" Asian carp harvested from U.S. rivers are rapidly growing and developing domestic markets will provide additional outlets for harvested Asian carps. Multiple contracts were secured by U.S. businesses in 2011 to export more than 60 million pounds of wild caught Asian carp to China. Domestic market demand for fish meal has the potential to support additional facilities that can process an estimated 37,000 pounds of Asian carp per facility per day. The limiting factor to increased harvest of Asian carp is not market demand, but the inadequate number and distribution of facilities specialized for processing and handling large quantities of Asian carp to meet current export demands. Processing facilities must be located reasonably close to the location where fish are harvested to provide a fresh product; however, there are currently only two major facilities, both located in Illinois. Businesses need to take a leadership role in developing these markets; government can be a partner and support business development (Charlebois et al. 2010).

There is a need for increased partnerships between governmental economic development agencies and businesses based on wild harvested Asian carps (Charlebois et al. 2010). Government agencies in several states are working with private industry to facilitate the development of a network of strategically located processing facilities in the lower Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio rivers (see attached figure) to enable increased commercial harvest of Asian carps in desired locations. Each new processing facility will cost approximately $3.5 million if constructed new; however, existing vacant buildings can be

[1] The total economic activity for outdoor recreation (fishing, hunting, and wildlife watching) in the counties and parishes within the Mississippi River valley and floodplain of ten states was estimated at slightly over $1 billion and 16,500 jobs in 2001 (Industrial Economics, Inc. 2004).

retrofitted for an estimated $1 million each. **These private-public partnerships are seeking federal financial support to assist in infrastructure development for this emerging industry.**

Federal, state, and local government assistance is warranted for a number of reasons. Commercial fishers report high incidental catch rates of Asian carps throughout large portions of the Mississippi River Basin, e.g., more than 7,000 pounds of Asian carp were unintentionally captured during a single day of fishing for native fish in Kentucky Lake in 2010. In the absence of commercial outlets, harvested Asian carps are often sunk or buried rather than released alive. Facilitating this emerging industry promotes the wise use of an abundant and unutilized resource and food source. Each new processing facility will create jobs in economically depressed river communities and provide a much needed boost to local economies. Developers estimate at least 10 full-time jobs will be created to operate each processing facility and additional part-time maintenance and trucking positions would also be created. Each processing facility is expected to initially contract with 10 commercial fishermen; the number of commercial fishing jobs is expected to increase with the market. This new industry will produce national economic benefits by developing new export products to China.

In addition to the human and economic benefits, government assistance will facilitate implementation of nationally approved strategies to prevent further spread of Asian carps, contain and control established populations, and mitigate the impacts of Asian carps on stressed native ecosystems. The effects of Asian carps on native ecosystems are likely to be proportional to their abundance; therefore, reducing the numbers of Asian carps should ameliorate potential adverse effects within these locations, and lower the chance that these fish will spread to new areas (Conover et al. 2007). Government assistance in the development of a strategically located network of processing facilities will enable immediate widespread efforts to reduce Asian carp populations in the Mississippi River Basin. Commercial harvest will provide some level of population control while research continues to search for and develop additional population reduction and eradication tools. Immediate action is needed to reduce the abundance of Asian carps and to begin mitigating the ecologic and economic impacts of established Asian carp populations. Reducing the abundance of Asian carps in the Mississippi River Basin supports international efforts to prevent the establishment of Asian carps in the Great Lakes.

Increased commercial harvest for Asian carps is not without risks. By-catch of non-target species can be problematic and is a concern for vulnerable native species, particularly economically and ecologically important species (e.g., sport fish and threatened or endangered fish). If a reliable, profitable market exists, intentional stocking of Asian carps into additional waters to create additional sources of these fish could result (Conover et al. 2007). Perhaps of greatest concern is the potential development of an industry and constituency that desires long-term management of abundant Asian carp populations.

Commercial harvest of Asian carps is legal in several states within the Mississippi River Basin and industries utilizing these species are already developing. Increased commercial harvest will result without government assistance; however, the risks associated with these emerging industries can best be ameliorated by proactive involvement of government agencies. Government agency assistance and involvement as these new industries are developing is most likely to achieve long-term natural resource management goals, and may also enable the benefits of population reduction to be realized sooner.

Natural resource management agencies are responsible for protecting and managing fish and wildlife resources of the states including the regulation of commercial fishing, and should work with this emerging industry to influence business plans, strategies, and ideologies that minimize risks associated with increased commercial harvest of Asian carps. It is crucial for natural resource management agencies to create an understanding that the long-term goal of commercial harvest is to fish Asian carp populations below sustainable levels and that long-term business strategies should not be based on abundant populations of bighead or silver carps. New business ventures based on wild harvested Asian carps should include financial protections or exit strategies. Resource management agencies will make **no effort** to maintain the Asian carp populations and can assist in the development of ecologically acceptable exit strategies. **Detailed exit strategies should be required prior to receiving public financial assistance.**

Figure 1. A map of the Mississippi River Basin showing the potential locations for a network of specialized processing facilities to enable increased commercial harvest of Asian carps in desired locations. Processing facilities must be located reasonably close to the location where fish are harvested to provide a fresh product; however, there are currently only two major facilities, both located in Illinois.

References:

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