

Illinois River Fish Facing New Threats

Exotic viruses join invasive species in state's waters.

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Friday, June 20, 2008 10:13 PM CDT

Exotic viruses are creating a different fish story on Midwestern rivers and lakes, notes former Ottawan Pam Martin Thiel.

"VHS is really a hot topic now," Thiel, of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in LaCrosse, Wis., said Friday, during a survey of the waterway at Utica. "We don't know yet if it is in the fish in the Illinois River, but we're checking to see if it is."

The week-long annual search extended from the Chicago suburbs to Havana. The check was for three species of invasive fish and lethal fish pathogens such as VHS, or Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia, and SVCV, or Spring Viremia Carp Virus.

There are a couple reasons why VHS is alarming scientists, anglers, and commercial fisheries alike.

"Because most viruses only affect one species or family of fish," said Thiel. "VHS, however, is impacting many different species, including sport fish."

VHS was first found in the United States in 2005. The mortality rate for fish infected with VHS can be as high as 90 percent.

In this case, the good news is that VHS is not something people can contract by eating infected fish.

"The concern is the very real impact VHS will have on fishing," said Thiel.

Round gobies infected with VHS were collected by U.S. Fish and Wildlife in Milwaukee Harbor in the Great Lakes Basin. Also, samples taken and analyzed by USFWS detected the virus in muskie, a game fish, on the Ohio River Basin.

"This is the first time for VHS to be found outside of the Great Lakes Basin," she noted. "It's moving, and that's why we're testing. We're monitoring the movement

of VHS.”

The USFWS team scoured the Illinois River at Morris for the two viruses, plus bighead carp, leaping silver carp, and round gobies, all invasive species.

SVCCV has already been found in the Illinois River.

“This virus is not as deadly as VHS, but it has caused major fish kills as well,” said Thiel. “Both VHS and SVCCV are exotic. Both came from Europe.”

Thursday's collection at Morris produced about 40 bighead and silver carp. Ryan Katona, a student at the LaCrosse, Wis., Fish Center, is taking tissue samples from the fish to the lab to examine for presence of the viruses.

“VHS is known to cause major fish kill in many different species of fish,” he said. “A lot of times it causes major hemorrhaging throughout the whole fish, causing the fish to die.”

Although not found so far in Asian Carp, VHS has been located in about 45 different species of fish.

Biologists are now more concerned than ever the VHS virus could spread from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi and Ohio River basins by way of the Illinois Waterway, said Thiel in a press release Tuesday.

The potential economic and environmental impacts of Asian carp, round goby, fish disease pathogens, and other invasive species such as zebra mussels, are widespread and significant.

USFWS staffer Louise Mauldin, La Crosse, said Thursday the three-man survey crew caught buffalo and bigmouth carp and gizzard shad, a native species that eats the same type of food as the exotics.

“So, they're competing with the exotic species for food and space,” she said.

Mauldin said the survey team collected two or three invasive species in the Morris area three years ago.

The crew netted about 50 invasive species in the same area this year, indicating their numbers are multiplying.

Thiel said the survey on the Illinois River is critical in determining whether the Asian carp have moved past electrical barrier near Romeoville to Lake Michigan. The survey also finds whether round goby have swum further downstream toward the Mississippi River.

She said USFWS is completing construction on a new fish barrier with 46 electrodes for installation in the river at Romeoville.

Thiel is project leader for the LaCrosse office and coordinator for the carp-goby roundup.

Jennie Sauer, of the U.S. Geological Survey, LaCrosse, was the third member of the crew.