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Despite improvements, Great Lakes plagued by pollution, international panel says

By JOHN FLESHER, Associated Press Writer

Despite improvements in recent decades, the Great Lakes remain a dumping ground for pollution ranging from livestock waste to mercury emissions, a U.S.-Canadian panel said Monday.

In its biennial report on Great Lakes water quality, the International Joint Commission urged the governments of both nations to step up protection and restoration efforts.

"There are a large number of problems still to be dealt with," Herb Gray, the Canadian co-chairman of the commission, said in a conference call with reporters. The U.S. co-chairman, Dennis Schornack, agreed but added that "things have progressively gotten better."

For nearly a quarter-century, the commission has issued biennial progress reports on implementation of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.

Under the 1978 pact, both nations agreed "to restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the waters of the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem" and to seek reductions in pollution.

Some of the system's water quality problems have been around for years. But Gray and Schornack said the agreement, which has not been updated in 17 years, should be revised to include newer challenges such as the zebra mussel invasion.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and its Canadian counterpart, Environment Canada, have formed a committee to consider updates. The IJC will offer suggestions by the end of the year, Schornack said.

Scientists have identified 162 exotic species in the Great Lakes and some believe the total exceeds 170, the IJC report said. They range from well-known invaders such as the zebra and quagga mussels and the fish-killing lamprey to foreign algae and protozoa.

Ballast water from oceangoing ships is believed to be a leading source of exotic species. The International Maritime Organization has a proposal for dealing with the ballast problem, but the commission report says it won't be implemented for another five years at the earliest.

In the meantime, an additional eight to 12 exotic species could be introduced to the lakes, the report says. It says both nations quickly should set their own rules.

"We're pressing them to get on with it," Gray said.

Another threat to the lakes comes from microbial pathogens that can cause gastrointestinal illnesses, the report says. Sources include pet wastes, manure from livestock farms and leaky septic tanks.

"Systems for waste collection and water treatment ... around the Great Lakes are inadequate or in decline," the report says.

Urban sprawl is causing an array of pollution problems: sewage overflows, stormwater runoff, motor vehicle emissions. The report says most groundwater problems can be traced to urban land-use practices such as excessive use of pesticides and fertilizers.

Mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants and other sources continue to pollute the lakes and accumulate in the bodies of some fish, the commission said. In its previous report, the panel urged both nations to improve their advisories about eating fish.

"The commission's concerns remain relevant today," the report said. "Advisories are often technical, sometimes offer conflicting advice, and typically fail to reach at-risk populations, including children and women of childbearing age."

The report seeks continued funding to study changes in the Lake Erie ecosystem, saying they often serve as an early warning about looming problems with the other Great Lakes.

It said the commission was "seriously concerned" about a rising number of oil and chemical spills in the connecting channel between Lake Huron and Lake Erie, particularly in the St. Clair River.