

Study: Great Lakes 'salties' ban may create jobs

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Banning ocean freighters from the Great Lakes and requiring those ships to transfer cargo in Montreal would create more than a thousand new jobs for domestic shipping employees, truckers and rail employees, according to a new study.

The study could fuel the debate about whether the time has come to ban transcontinental ships from the St. Lawrence Seaway.

Built in 1959 by the U.S. and Canadian governments, the Seaway is a series of locks and canals that linked the Great Lakes to the global shipping industry. It has become controversial in recent years because the ocean ships the Seaway allowed into the lakes inadvertently imported foreign species, including zebra and quagga mussels, that caused billions of dollars in damage.

Critics have suggested closing the Seaway until shipping companies can prove ocean freighters are not importing more harmful foreign species into the lakes. The new study suggests there might be an economic incentive to keeping ocean ships out.

"We knew there were a fairly small number of jobs directly related to ocean shipping in the Great Lakes. We were surprised how few jobs there were, given the comments of the St. Lawrence Seaway administration," said John C. Taylor, a Grand Valley State University economics professor who co-authored the study with transportation consultant James L. Roach.

The study did not advocate banning ocean ships from the Great Lakes. It analyzed whether such a move made economic sense.

The study comes on the 20th anniversary of scientists discovering zebra mussels in Lake St. Clair. Scientists have said zebra and quagga mussels, which spread to all five Great

Lakes and surface waters in at least 23 states, have caused some of the most profound ecological changes ever recorded in the lakes -- the largest source fresh surface water on the planet.

Despite the myriad of problems invasive species imported by ocean freighters have caused in the lakes, the notion of barring them from the Seaway is "absurd," said Terry Johnson, Jr., administrator of the St. Lawrence Seaway Development Corp.

"The premise is that we would somehow abrogate a 100-year-old treaty with one of our largest trading partners and neighbor to the North, and that's just not going to happen," Johnson said. "This (study) is a paper exercise."

Jennifer Nalbene, campaign director for Great Lakes United, said U.S. and Canadian officials who operate the Seaway should give the Taylor-Roach study an objective review.

"These experts are putting forth potential solutions for the trans-shipment of goods (from ocean freighters onto trucks and trains) and we would like to see the shipping industry respond with research instead of rhetoric," Nalbene said.

There are 1,001 jobs in the U.S. and Canada, and 891 foreign jobs, linked to ocean ships that haul cargo in and out of the Great Lakes, according to the Taylor-Roach study.

Banning those ships from the lakes, and forcing them to transfer cargo in Montreal to domestic ships, trucks and trains, would generate 2,320 jobs in the U.S. and Canada.

The bottom line: Keeping ocean freighters, so-called salties, out of the lakes would create a net gain of 1,319 domestic jobs. Even with the loss of foreign shipping jobs, a ban on salties still results in an increase of 428 jobs, according to the study.

About one-third of the new domestic jobs would be created along the East Coast, Gulf Coast and river ports capable of transferring cargo from ocean ships to trucks and trains, the study said.

Steve Fisher, executive director of the American Great Lakes Ports Association, said the notion of closing the Seaway to ocean ships is a "false idea."

"No one except these two professors are even talking about it," Fisher said.

Several environmental groups and a handful of lawmakers in the region have suggested closing the Seaway until ocean ships can prove their ballast water tanks are not carrying more foreign species into the lakes.

A 2005 study by Taylor and Roach suggested the environmental costs of ocean ships entering the Great Lakes far outweighed the economic benefits.

Ocean ships, which haul about 5 percent of all cargo on the Great Lakes, have imported at least 60 of the 185 invasive species in the lakes.

The 2005 Taylor-Roach study said banning ocean ships from the lakes would add 6 percent annually, \$55 million, to the cost of shipping goods in and out of the lakes, a cost that could be passed on to consumers. But that's a fraction of the estimated \$500 million in environmental and economic harm caused annually by foreign species that ocean ships imported to the lakes, according to the Taylor-Roach study.

Taylor said ocean ships could easily unload their cargo in Montreal, where it would be transferred to trucks, trains and lake freighters.

Shipping industry officials have long argued that existing roads and rail lines could not handle the additional cargo currently hauled by ocean freighters. They also contend that transferring cargo from ocean ships to trucks and trains would increase air pollution and cause more traffic fatalities.

About 565 ocean freighters enter and leave the Great Lakes each year via the Seaway. That works out to an average of two ocean freighters entering and leaving the Seaway each day during the shipping season.

"The total volume of ocean vessel traffic is about the amount that could be carried by a medium-density single track rail line or a single daily tug/barge tow on the Lower Mississippi River," according to the Taylor-Roach report.