

AIS Virtual Response Exercise Summary

Hosted by Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources May 19, 2021

Background

The Governors' and Premiers' AIS Task Force approached Wisconsin DNR in late 2020 about hosting a virtual response exercise. Given the Task Force's focus on invasive silver and bighead carp (as "least wanted" species), the DNR determined that it could provide a relevant example of an invasion scenario in the Mississippi River basin. The main goal of this virtual response exercise was to foster collaboration among the parties of the Mutual Aid Agreement (MAA) to enhance the capability of all parties to respond to serious AIS threats in their jurisdiction. In the exercise, the intent was to practice execution of the MAA in response to a simulated threat of AIS invasion.

Preparation

Wisconsin DNR collaborated with jurisdictional partners in preparation for the Virtual Response Exercise. An internal team of Fisheries Management, Office of Great Waters, and Water Quality (AIS subprogram) staff first held several meetings to determine scope and techniques for a virtual exercise. Wisconsin then engaged Task Force partners from Minnesota DNR (Heidi Wolf and the AIS Team at Minnesota DNR) to utilize the collaborative relationship built during Minnesota's Modified Unified Method (MUM) development and initial efforts on the Mississippi River. (Note: A preliminary preview of the virtual exercise at the AIS Task Force in early May 2021 suggested that several members were interested in learning more about this methodology; the MUM combines netting and herding techniques to drive and concentrate invasive carp from a large area of water into a small zone for removal.) The team also engaged partners from US Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Parks Service to plan the virtual exercise.

Virtual Response Exercise: Outcomes

Wisconsin's internal staff learned a great deal about our own framework for AIS response, protocols and readiness during planning for the Virtual Response Exercise. The exercise also gave an opportunity to review the Mutual Aid Agreement and take an inventory of resources in preparedness for AIS invasions. A non-desktop scenario would have invoked the ICS (Incident

Command System) on the ground. Wisconsin spent time determining the logistics involved in activating that communications system.

The exercise also gave the opportunity to network with other professionals who have dealt with similar AIS response situations both in a simulated as well as practical environments.

Furthermore, staff learned specific techniques and methods employed by other agencies and partners that have dealt with AIS response efforts and how those may or may not be applicable to Wisconsin waters. A key lesson learned is that a significant and knowledgeable group of professionals in the AIS field who we can call upon for expertise, advice and potentially assistance when a large scale AIS response may be needed.

Overall, the exercise was extremely valuable. It identified strengths and weaknesses for responses to AIS invasions in Wisconsin's waters. The inventory of assets (e.g. expertise, equipment, staff, communications systems), identification of roles and responsibilities, and collaboration among state and federal governments are critical when dealing with AIS on interjurisdictional waters like the St. Croix River. The exercise also brought together a group of professionals who have had limited interaction prior to this exercise and provided an opportunity to network, brainstorm and discuss previous AIS responses in various management areas. The exercise also identified willing partners and specific staff as well as their areas of expertise that could be available if called upon in the future. Wisconsin appreciated everyone's willingness to participate and is grateful for their time and input.