



Never too soon to regulate ballast

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If you understand how much damage invasive species have inflicted on the Great Lakes, then a ballast [water](#) rule can't take effect soon enough.

Impatience here is justified, but that's only part of the reason deadlines in proposed [Coast Guard](#)  rules to regulate ballast water discharge are too leisurely. Starting in 2012, ships will have to meet a rather lax international standard; then they'll have at least another four years to meet the next, somewhat more stringent standard.

Ballast water from ships that travel the globe has been the transfer agent for pests ranging from the enormously destructive zebra and [quagga mussels](#)  to pesky fish such as the round goby. The water, which ships carry to balance out their loads or lack thereof, is sucked up in one port and then dumped in another, laden with whatever small things -- eggs or larval stages of various creatures, plant life and no-good bacteria -- were hanging around at the time of intake.

It has been 21 years -- 21 years of virtual paralysis about whether and how to treat ballast water - - since zebra mussels were found in Lake St. Clair. Oceangoing ships do exchange their ballast water on the open sea before they enter the lakes, but for various reasons this has not proved terribly effective.

The answer is full-fledged [water treatment](#) that kills most living organisms, and a variety of systems are under development. Progress will surely be rapid once shipping companies know a date certain that they must comply.

In addition to the Great Lakes, coastal harbors and bays throughout the country have suffered from transoceanic arrivals, and this is a nationwide rule. But the Great Lakes constitute a closed, freshwater [system](#) that faces unique and incredible difficulty in rebounding from the serial shocks of new species.

One option the Coast Guard has is to set stiffer rules sooner for the Great Lakes, a decision that would be welcome. The Michigan Natural Resources Commission has told the Coast Guard to set the toughest standard, virtual sterilization of ballast water discharge, and fast. That's the right request for the lakes.

Congress, led by Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., told the Coast Guard in 1990 and again in 1996 ago to develop the rules now out for comment. After all this time, the Coast Guard needs to do right by the lakes, and do it now.

Because it should have happened yesterday.