

## **The VHS “EDUCATION ALLIANCE”**

An education and outreach campaign is underway in an effort to slow and/or prevent the spread of viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS) into aquaculture facilities, and to prevent or slow the spread of the disease from the Great Lakes areas to other waterways. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is funding the campaign.

The campaign, called Focus on Fish Health, began in 2007. Recent cases of VHS in inland waters in Michigan, New York, Ohio and Wisconsin highlighted the need to address VHS not only from a regulatory perspective, but also from a public education perspective. The evidence indicates that the spread of VHS into inland water bodies may be due to recreational fishing activities, and that successfully controlling VHS will take help from the fishing and boating public as well as regulatory actions.

The campaign is drawing upon the extensive expertise of a number of groups with established networks within the recreational fishing and boating communities to help develop and implement the Focus on Fish Health campaign. APHIS brought together this voluntary group of stakeholders which has informally been designated the “VHS Education Alliance.”

Members of this alliance include representatives from:

Cornell University

Iowa State University, Center for Food Security and Public Health

Michigan State Department of Natural Resources

Regional Aquaculture Centers

The National Aquaculture Association

The New York, Michigan and Minnesota Sea Grant offices

The University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff

The University of Idaho and the Ohio State University

USDA Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service

U.S. Department of Interior, U.S. Geological Survey

Wisconsin State Department of Agriculture

The alliance is providing information and suggestions to APHIS, and APHIS, in turn, is using this input in implementing the campaign. Alliance members also distribute information and materials to their constituencies.

As a result of alliance suggestions, a VHS website is being developed by Iowa State University’s Center for Food Security and Public Health. The center is developing and will host the website funded by a cooperative agreement from APHIS. The website is intended to be engaging and user-friendly, and will contain currently available VHS print, audio and video materials. The initial target audience will be boaters, anglers and youth as well as the general public. It is expected to go live in December 2008. As resources allow, information and materials for extension specialists, aquaculture producers and

technical and professional audiences may be added along with resources on current regulations and/or personnel to contact for more information about VHS.

Another alliance initiative is research that will help focus APHIS' education and outreach efforts and inform the campaign's future messages and directions. The Human Dimensions Research Unit at Cornell University is receiving an APHIS grant to conduct research to provide insight on stakeholders in the Great Lakes Region. The research will identify the range of knowledge, awareness and concern about VHS among key stakeholder groups, identify sources of information used by them, and learn about their willingness to respond to VHS and actual behavioral responses taken by them. The information should also be useful for other stakeholders developing and disseminating VHS related information.

One of the campaign's first activities was to develop a wallet-sized card with information on how individuals can reduce the chances of spreading VHS through their activities, while still enjoying the outdoors. Since the spring, thousands of cards have been distributed through many of the State Departments of Natural Resources in the Great Lakes region, through the National Park Service and tribal groups in the Great Lakes region, and through the Wal-Mart FLW Outdoors fishing tours.



**Viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS)** is a serious disease of freshwater and saltwater fish that recently has been found widely throughout the Great Lakes region of the United States and Canada. VHS is not a threat to human health.

*You can make a difference*

To learn more, visit  
[www.aphis.usda.gov/healthyfish](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/healthyfish)

**USDA** United States Department of Agriculture  
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

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#### ROUTINE PRECAUTIONS

- Thoroughly clean and dry fishing equipment, bait buckets, boats, and trailers before using them in a new body of water.
- Empty all water from equipment before transporting.
- Remove all visible mud, plants, and aquatic life from your equipment.
- Do not transfer fish or plants from one body of water to another.
- Do not introduce fish of an unknown health status into populations of farmed fish.

If you suspect VHS, please immediately report all findings to your State department of agriculture or State department of fish and game.



An ongoing advertising campaign is continuing. Starting in early 2008, APHIS placed advertisements with information about VHS, and what individuals can do to mitigate

their potential impact in its spread, in numerous trade magazines with regional and national exposure. The selection of publications was chosen with the help of alliance members. These include: Aquaculture Magazine, Fish Farming News, Great Lakes Boating, Great Lakes Angler, Lake Erie Living, Lake Ontario Outdoors, Michigan Outdoor News, Sailing and Muskie. There is also collaboration with Bassmaster.com to post similar information on their conservation page.



## There's Nothing Fishy About Healthy Fish.

**T**here's danger in the waters. Viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS) is a serious disease of fresh and saltwater fish that has recently been found widely throughout the Great Lakes region of the United States and Canada. VHS is not a threat to human health.



**STOP AQUATIC HITCHHIKERS!**  
Prevent the transport of nuisance species.  
Clean all recreational equipment.  
[www.ProtectYourWaters.net](http://www.ProtectYourWaters.net)



VHS spreads among fish through urine and reproductive fluids released into the water, and also through the eating of other infected fish. Infected fish and water can easily spread the virus if they are released into a new body of water. Appropriate hygienic or other routine biosecurity precautions are necessary to protect aquatic animal health and prevent further spread of the disease.

### The Healthy Way

- Thoroughly clean and dry fishing equipment, bait buckets, boats, and trailers before using them again.
- Empty all water from equipment before transporting.
- Remove all mud, plants, and aquatic life from equipment.
- Do not move fish or plants from one body of water to another.
- Do not introduce fish of an unknown health status into populations of farmed fish.

*To learn more, visit*

[www.aphis.usda.gov/healthyfish](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/healthyfish)

**USDA** United States Department of Agriculture  
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Finally, all of the informational materials include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's "Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers" logo and website, as both campaigns have similar, although not identical, themes and goals.



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Please be on the look out for the 'Focus on Fish Health' logo as this will designate future activities of the campaign.

