

## BEYOND THE HEADLINES: Flex your mussels

By Vernon Morning Star

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Okanagan residents are increasingly concerned about being invaded, but the Great Lakes basin has experienced the nightmare for years.

Zebra mussels are native to eastern Europe, but in 1988 they arrived in the Great Lakes in the ballast of freighters. Since then, they have spread like wildfire.

"The annual cost of keeping water intake systems free of the mussels is about \$250 million in the Great Lakes region, according to the University of Wisconsin Sea Grant Institute," states an April 5 Associated Press report in the *Fond du Lac Reporter*.

"Zebra mussels also have been tied to outbreaks of toxin-producing blue-green algae. Swimmers are known to cut their feet on the shells. And along Lake Michigan, zebra mussels play a role in making many beaches smelly and unwelcoming because they spur the growth of a type of algae known as cladophora, which washes ashore with the mussels and other organic material and rots."

A University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh economics student has suggested that zebra mussels may actually improve water quality and that could boost property values. While that may be the case in Wisconsin, Okanagan officials have suggested the opposite could happen here.

"This is a nerve issue for people in the valley. They really don't want this to happen," said Toby Pike, with the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

Many people have invested large dollars in lakefront properties while public beaches are jammed every summer with locals and tourists. Imagine what would happen if people began ripping open their feet on shells? Beaches could become vacant and those once desirable lakefront paradises may drop in value.

OBWB has estimated it could cost \$43 million a year to manage the mussels if they arrive in the valley, and that is the impact on everything from maintaining water infrastructure to tourism.

Trying to be proactive, OBWB has demanded that the federal government allow border guards to prohibit the entry of any contaminated vessels into Canada. It also wants a provincial inspection program that would cover all B.C. borders, including with Alberta.

However, Ottawa and Victoria twiddle their thumbs while the mussels move ever closer to the Okanagan.

"We need to light a fire boys and girls," director Allan Patton told his OBWB colleagues.

Increasingly, it's obvious that the spark for that fire must come from rank-and-file citizens. Senior governments may wake up and take action if there is a groundswell from the public.

If you value our Okanagan lifestyle and worry about how zebra and quagga mussels may impact it, contact your elected representatives:

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Experts say it's a matter of when, not if, these invasive mussels arrive in the Okanagan. Given that, time is running out to prepare ourselves.

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