

NEWS

Water board wants quicker action against invasive mussels

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West Kelowna Mayor Doug Findlater is also chair of the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

— *Image Credit: Contributed*

With public support growing for action from senior levels of government on invasive mussels and now that Alberta now has inspection stations, the Okanagan Basin Water Board is asking senior levels of government: “What’s taking so long?”

“We have been sounding the alarm for two years now, warning of the threat invasive zebra and quagga mussels pose to the Okanagan and elsewhere,” said Doug Findlater, OBWB chair.

“Our research indicates the cost could be more than \$43 million a year to just manage this problem. And while we have launched our Don’t Move a Mussel campaign to raise awareness, and promoted the outreach of others and the ‘Clean, Drain, Dry’ message, we need concrete action. The only organizations in a position to do this effectively are the provincial and federal government.”

Findlater, the mayor of West Kelowna, noted that fellow directors expressed concern at this week’s board meeting and voted to take further action to pressure senior governments to act.

In particular, they were responding to a report on a board initiative that encourages residents to visit www.DontMoveAMussel.ca and “Speak Out” – sending a letter to their MLA and MP, urging action on invasive mussels. Speak Out was created in response to calls from the public for a way to push senior levels of government to act. While public response has been positive, and local electeds have taken notice, there’s still no concrete movement on the file.

After months of pushing for action, the province brought in legislation in December 2012 banning the movement of the mussels, dead or alive—but there’s still no enforcement, noted Findlater.

The OBWB has been urging the province to bring in inspection stations – similar to successful self-funded boater-pay sticker programs in the U.S. The board has also been calling on the federal government to pass pending legislation allowing Canada Border Services agents to stop and inspect boats coming into Canada.

This week’s response from the board is also based on an update it received on a recent meeting on invasive mussels at the Pacific Northwest Economic Region Summit.

At that meeting, attended by provincial and state officials from Western Canada and NorthWest U.S. states, it was reported that Alberta has now established inspection stations on four major routes entering that province along its south and east borders.

So far this year, inspectors have intercepted eight mussel-infected boats, all headed for the Calgary and Edmonton areas. Alberta estimates the cost of an invasive-mussel infestation in that province would be \$75 million a year. With one female mussel able to produce a million off-spring each year, Alberta is taking it seriously.

In response to this information, the board voted to send letters to the federal and provincial ministers responsible and push for action once again. The board will also be requesting a meeting with B.C. Minister of Environment Mary Polak at September’s Union of B.C. Municipalities convention.

Action by our province is not dependent on the federal government acting, noted Findlater. “Alberta didn’t wait for the federal legislation. They moved quickly to protect their lakes and we should be doing the same. They get it— it’s a serious threat and they’ve invested money in helping protect themselves. B.C. needs to do the same.”

In addition to sending letters to appropriate provincial and federal ministers, and continuing with its awareness campaign, the OBWB will be investigating the impacts of the mussels to specific industries (e.g. hydro and recreational boating) in an effort to help them prepare for a potential invasion.