

Okanagan Basin Water Board demands more action on invasive mussels



Zebra and quagga mussels are identified as two of B.C.'s most "unwanted species"
Image Credit: Invasive Species Council of B.C.

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OKANAGAN - The Okanagan Basin Water Board is calling on the provincial government to step up the fight against invasive quagga and zebra mussels by establishing permanent inspection stations at the five main highway entrances from Alberta.

As well, in a seven-point position paper, the water board is calling on the federal government to immediately step up training of Canadian Border Services Agency staff and increase inspection of boats entering B.C. through 11 federal border crossings in the south.

"The Okanagan is faced with a new aquatic invasive species threat from zebra and quagga mussels," the report states, referencing the failed battle to control and eradicate milfoil in Okanagan Lake. "Where milfoil has ultimately been an expensive, controllable, nuisance, a zebra or quagga mussel infestation threatens our environment, economy and way of life."

The paper estimates the financial impact of a permanent infestation at \$43-million annually. "This is not hyperbole. This scenario has played out across watersheds throughout North America, where ecosystems and local economies have been drastically altered by these invaders."

A new awareness of the threat emerged last spring when mussels were discovered aboard a pleasure boat bound for Okanagan Lake. The boat was stopped and decontaminated at the Osooyoos border crossing after a sharp-eyed customs officer noticed the mollusks.

The water board also says it will not be held to blame if invasive freshwater mussels do establish themselves in Okanagan Lake and other B.C. lakes without the province enacting appropriate prevention measures.

“While aquatic invasive species prevention is clearly the responsibility of the province, the milfoil program has shown there is no appetite at the provincial level for long-term control and management of these species once they are established,” the report says, suggesting the province downloads responsibility to local government for control and mitigation.

The water board promises to continue provide outreach and education through the Don't Move A Mussel program and to collaborate with relevant local governments and agencies.

The position paper was approved by the Okanagan Basin Water Board at its monthly meeting earlier this week. The board is made up of representatives from communities throughout the Okanagan Valley.

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