

Water board warns not enough done to curb invaders

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The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) is warning that more needs to be done to avoid a massive cost to taxpayers on the heels of the B.C. government announcing June as Invasive Species Action Month.

That cost would come from the invasion of zebra and quagga mussels into B.C.'s lakes, something the OBWB is saying the government isn't doing enough to prevent.

"Everybody needs more awareness. I think there's a lot more invasive species than zebra and quagga mussels, so it's a broad-based invasive species education month," said Anna Warwick Sears, executive director of the Okanagan Basin Water Board. "We personally want to see a lot more action on keeping these zebra and quagga mussels out."

A position statement released by the OBWB says the board "will not accept responsibility for the long-term treatment, mitigation or control of zebra or quagga mussels if the province fails to enact appropriate prevention measures, and consequently the species are introduced."

A prior economic impact study by marine biologist Heather Larratt, who was hired by the Okanagan Basin Water Board for the study two years ago, estimated the annual cost of a mussel invasion to taxpayers could be as high as over \$40 million per year in the first few years. That cost includes lost revenue and property values, added maintenance of aquatic infrastructure and irreparable ecological damage.

B.C. is one of a handful of places in North America that are considered mussel-free, along with Alberta, Saskatchewan, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Wyoming. However, the board is saying there is no guarantee that B.C. will stay that way.

"Awareness is great, but action is better," Said Doug Findlater, OBWB chair, in a press release.

The statement from the board points to the lessons learned from the 45 years the board has been controlling the invasion of milfoil in the Okanagan. The program has cost Okanagan taxpayers over \$10 million during the containment, with the province contributing less than \$8 million over the project's lifetime, and zero dollars in the last 15 years according to a staff report from the OBWB.

The OBWB hopes that the reality of the milfoil invasion can be used as an example for the importance of prevention and preparedness in keeping zebra and quagga mussels out of B.C. lakes.

"The scenario of what happens if a lake in B.C. does get infected is pretty scary because then you go from inspections at the borders to some kind of perimeter containment, quarantine and an amazing hassle for every boat owner, and a lot heavier restrictions," Warwick Sears said.

The board is calling for the province to establish permanent inspection stations on the Alberta border, as well as the federal government to empower Canada Border Services agents to stop and inspect all incoming watercraft. Alberta currently has ten permanent and four roving inspection stations in place on their side of the border, as well as three mussel-sniffing dogs.

Federal border services do not currently have the authority to stop watercraft with invasive species coming into the Canadian border, however federal regulations are currently pending after the process to add the regulations and authority for Border Services began late last year.

"There currently is just no law about it," said Warwick Sears. "Even if a border guard sees a boat with invasive mussels on it, they're not legally supposed to stop them for that reason."

She said the matter is currently with the Department of Justice who are finalizing the regulations which are aiming to be in place before the 2015 boating season.

"Right now they can stop them for other reasons, or they can politely ask them to wait to get decontaminated, but they don't have the law in their hands," Warwick Sears said.

The B.C. government is asking all residents to keep an eye out for invaders with the announcement of Invasive Species Action Month to boost awareness on the issue. The government also announced a \$1.3-million program to fight the mussels invasion on March 31 focusing on early detection and rapid response and footing the bill for three mobile boat decontamination units, six specially trained auxiliary conservation officers and 24 new highway signs to be displayed at key entry points to B.C.

The funding includes \$149,000 spent in 2014-15, \$575,000 in 2015-16 and the same amount once again in 2016-17.

"For a little more funding the province could install five permanent and mandatory inspection stations along the B.C.-Alberta border — a call that is being repeated by an increasing number of local governments around B.C., residents and even the B.C. Chamber of Commerce thanks to a push by the Kelowna Chamber," Findlater said in the position statement.

The Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen also received funding to fight aquatic invasive species after a bid to receive financial support from the Royal Bank of Canada's Blue Water Project Leadership Grant was successful. The RBC made \$100,000 in grant funding available to the RDOS to support the Okanagan Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention Program addressing the quagga and zebra mussels

issue.

Another \$1.7 million investment was also announced by the provincial government for its annual invasive plant grants. The funds are being distributed to 29 regional districts, municipalities and invasive species organizations to combat the spread of invasive plants. That funding adds to the \$735,000 which is already given by the Ministry of Forests, lands and Natural Resource Operations this year for invasive plant control.

Invasive Species Action Month is the provincial government's call on British Columbians to educate themselves about non-native plants and animals that can damage ecosystems. A free Report-a-Weed app for iPhones and Android Smartphones allows users to submit reports of invasive plant sightings from anywhere in B.C. Users can upload photos and view previously recorded sightings.

The OBWB is also seeking out a meeting with the premier and Minister of Environment at the Union of B.C. Municipalities conference in September in Vancouver. They hope to discuss increasing the government capacity for inspections and making sure the project is fully funded.

"We need to take some responsibility for our lakes and I think it's so important to us here in the Okanagan, but all over the Interior really," Warwick Sears said. "We want to continue to raise the profile of this issue in the Okanagan and continue to find partnerships outside of the valley to raise awareness in other parts of B.C."

For more information visit www.reportaweedbc.ca and to learn more about invasive species www.bcinvases.ca and to learn more about zebra and quagga mussels visit www.dontmoveamussel.ca

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