



Former B.C. premier Christy Clark at her announcement in West Kelowna earlier this year about enhanced measures to prevent invasive mussels from reaching provincial waters was joined by Kilo, a dog being trained to sniff out zebra and quagga mussels. Image credit: Alistair Waters, Capital News

OBWB out front on mussel disaster prevention

Water board hoping others will share their sense of urgency

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The Okanagan Basin Water Board is not alone in advocating for more measures to protect against invasive zebra and quagga mussels from invading the Okanagan valley watershed.

It just feels like it sometimes.

At two recent public meetings, OBWB staff presentations about the current state of the invasive mussel prevention concerns have echoed sentiments about the need for this issue to be taken more seriously by other watershed management organizations across the province.

From the OBWB's perspective, an adult mussel infestation established in Okanagan Lake would result in an estimated \$43 million annual management cost and cause significant impacts on tourism related industries that rely on access to the lake and water intake stations.

The OBWB has adopted a two-pronged approach—to advocate for more stringent mussel prevention services such as mandating all boats entering B.C. legally require a mussel boat inspection, and on a public outreach platform to promote awareness in the boating community and promote the Clean, Drain and Dry decontamination and inspection initiative.

Related: [More to do in fight against invasive mussels](#)

The Fraser Basin Board and Invasive Species Council of B.C. are two groups who share the OBWB's concerns about aquatic mussels, but have adopted different approaches to advocating for waterway protection policy changes.

Jim Vanderwal, senior manager with the Fraser Basin, acknowledges the OBWB is at the forefront of this issue in pushing politicians to provide more government funding for inspection services and public education initiatives.

"We don't really see the point of duplicating what is already being done with the resources we have," said Vanderwal.

"Not to say that invasive mussels is not an important issue, but if we have five things we want to accomplish and only have funding for four of them, if one of them already has others advocating on that particular issue, how much more impact are we going to have?"

"With invasive mussels, the Invasive Species Council of B.C. is already working on this as a province-wide organization and the OBWB has also put a lot of work in on this issue, so the question is what else can we do beyond supporting those efforts."

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Gail Wallin, executive director of the Invasive Species Council of B.C. based out of Williams Lake, said her organization's mandate is to confront both the aquatic, water-based, and terrestrial, land-based, species issues posing a hazard to our provincial lakes and rivers.

"We were raising concerns about (aquatic mussels) over a decade ago when it wasn't really on anyone else's radar at the time," said Wallin, noting the Clean, Drain and Dry campaign was largely formulated by her council in cooperation with the province.

She said while the OBWB is pushing for mandatory inspection of all boats entering B.C., Wallin said she wants to "fill the toolbox with as many tools as possible" to help prevent the mussels from arriving.

"Our style is definitely different from the (OKWB). We have and continue to work with government on bringing about mussel prevention boating regulation changes... Instead of banging on someone's desk and tell them what they are doing is wrong, we are trying to figure out ways to make things better."

She says the boating community has to be fully engaged in the mussel concerns and the boating community needs to financially support safety measures in the same way anglers and hunters are invested to support hunting and fishing habitat protection and enhancement programs.

"It's not just a matter of government paying to fix the problem, we all have to part of the solution," Wallin said.

Related: [Kelowna Chamber champions protection against mussel invasion](#)

Anna Warwick Sears, executive director of the OBWB, says the water board is carrying out its mandate to identify problems in water management issues and inform and influence other levels of government on how to address them.

"No one else is advocating on the mussel issue like we are, but any other groups that can join us on this would be hugely helpful," Warwick Sears said.

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"I don't really feel like we are carving a leadership role in the province, we are just doing what we think is necessary. If we are the only ones doing it, then I guess we are taking the lead."

Warwick Sears said the OBWB has the advantage of civic politicians on the board who are used to advocating other levels of government on behalf of their constituencies, and is not grant dependent on pursuing advocacy issues.

On the public advocacy side, Warwick Sears says it has become apparent to her that years of promoting mussel awareness has resonated with the Okanagan region.

"The greater awareness we can bring to this locally the more we can build on the shared sense of responsibility to protect Okanagan Lake. The more partners we have would be great, definitely the more the merrier, but we will carry on regardless because of what is at stake."