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NEWS

Invasive mussels spotted closer to the Okanagan



Zebra mussels are being spotted closer to the BC border — Image Credit: Contributed

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by Alistair Waters - Kelowna Capital News
Okanagan posted Feb 21, 2017 at 6:00 AM

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The Okanagan Basin Water Board is calling on the province to include proper mussel prevention funding in light of news that the invasive species has been found in a Montana lake, only a few hours away from the B.C. border.

The call comes in a letter from new OBWB's new chairwoman Tracy Gray addressed to B.C.'s environment minister, Mary Polak, Premier Christy Clark and Finance Minister Mike de Jong.

"We urge you to immediately allocate permanent, sufficient funding for an expanded inspection and decontamination program, starting with this year's provincial budget," writes Gray.

"Prevention now will be far more cost-effective than dealing with a wide spread infestation."

An example of the cost attached to the species is in Ontario, where government officials have said the total cost of managing the impacts of zebra mussels in their province is estimated to be about \$75 to \$91 million per year. That amount includes funding for "education, cleaning, maintenance of equipment, around zebra mussels."

An extensive 2013 study conducted for the OBWB estimated that zebra or quagga mussels could cost at least \$43 million each year to the Okanagan alone, in lost revenue, added maintenance of aquatic infrastructure and irreparable ecological damage.

The Pacific Northwest economic region, made up of provincial and state government representatives in the Pacific Northwest, and with a mission to increase economic well-being and quality of life for all citizens in the region, has estimated a mussel infestation at \$500 million a year to the Pacific NW.

In addition to funding, the letter provides a number of other recommendations, including:

- Legislative changes to require all watercraft entering B.C. to report to an inspection station, prior to launching in provincial waters;
- Adding invasive mussel infestations to a list of specified hazards under B.C.'s Emergency Program Management Regulation.
- Making the province's Early Detection Rapid Response Plan be recognized as a multi-agency hazard plan under Emergency Management B.C., ensuring appropriate supports are available to immediately contain infested water bodies.
- That B.C. enhance its monitoring network to ensure any infestation is identified as soon as possible, allowing the best chance of immediately quarantining a water body and preventing further spread.

"The zebra and quagga mussel issue is a top priority for me and the rest of the water board," said Gray. "And I intend to passionately advocate with senior government on this file, and keep the pressure on."

Gray was elected chairwoman of the OBWB Feb. 7, replacing West Kelowna Mayor Doug Findlater, who decided not seek another term.

Findlater was a strong advocate for a stronger response to fighting the threat of invasive mussels and said last week that despite stepping away from leading the OBWB, remains so.

Gray said the board needs assurances of ongoing funding for mussel prevention from the province, and defence should an infestation occur.

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"In 2016, the eight provincial inspection stations were funded through BC Hydro, FortisBC, Columbia Power and Columbia Basin Trust. Although the OBWB welcomed news of this funding, it has consistently recommended an ongoing core funding model to ensure stability of the mussel defence program."

She said time is not on Okanagan Lake's side, as all it takes is one infested watercraft to put local drinking water, fisheries, economy, beaches and more, at risk.

"We don't want to say 'We knew this was a concern and we should have done more,' said Gray. "We need to do as much as possible now, so our kids and grandkids have the same opportunity to walk on our beaches in bare feet like we have."

The OBWB sent a similar letter to the federal government in December, urging funding and supports to address the invasive mussel issue.

Gray said the board and its Okanagan WaterWise program remain committed to doing its part with its Don't Move A Mussel campaign.

The board is also urging locals to "have the talk" about invasive mussels with their friends and family returning from areas with existing infestations.

"If they're coming back from an area that is mussel-infested, they should be following the Clean-Drain-Dry protocol (for all water cast and equipment used in the water) to help protect our waters," added Gray."

For more information on the mussels, risks to the Okanagan, how to 'have the talk,' Clean-Drain-Dry and other prevention tips, go to DontMoveAMussel.ca.