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Okanagan Basin Water Board pushes province to make invasive mussels a priority

SUBMITTED/Okanagan Basin Water Board





Image Credit: US National Parks Service

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As the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) watches the fall-out of the discovery of invasive mussels in Montana, only a few hours drive from B.C., and with news that the B.C. Government is getting ready to announce its latest budget, the board is calling on the province to include proper mussel prevention funding.

The call comes in a letter sent to B.C.'s Minister of Environment Mary Polak, and cc'ed to Premier Christy Clark, Finance Minister Mike DeJong and others, by the OBWB's new chair Tracy Gray.

"We urge you to immediately allocate permanent, sufficient funding for an expanded inspection and decontamination program, starting with this year's provincial budget," states Gray. "Prevention now will be far more cost-effective than dealing with a wide spread infestation."

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;
- That invasive infestations be added as a specified hazard under B.C.'s Emergency Program Management Regulation (EPMR). Currently the EPMR lists some agricultural pests as a specified hazard. The OBWB suggests that invasive mussels be included. And that 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. And,
- That B.C. enhance its monitoring network to ensure that any infestation is identified as soon as possible, allowing the best chance of immediately quarantining a water body and preventing the further spread.

"The zebra and quagga mussel issue is a top priority for me and the rest of the Water Board and I intend to passionately advocate with senior government on this file, and keep the pressure on," said Gray, who was elected chair at the Feb. 7 OBWB board meeting. "In the case of the province, we need assurances that there is ongoing funding for mussel prevention and defence, should an infestation occur."

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.

"Time is not our friend in this, and all it takes is one infested watercraft to put our drinking water, our fisheries, our economy, beaches and more, at risk. We don't want to say 'We knew this was a concern and we should have done more.' 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," added Gray.

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 OBWB and its Okanagan WaterWise program remains committed to doing its part on the issue, for example with its "Don't Move A Mussel" (DMM) public outreach campaign. Since DMM launched in 2013, it has delivered a campaign valued at over \$650,000, thanks in part to generous support from local media and other business partners.

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

\$200 million a year to the Pacific NW.

"As snowbirds look to return home, we urge Okanagan residents to 'Have The Talk' with their returning friends and family," added Gray. "If they're coming back from an area that is mussel-infested, they should be following the Clean-Drain-Dry protocol to help protect our waters."

For more information on the mussels, risks to the Okanagan, how to 'Have the Talk,' Clean-Drain-Dry and other prevention tips, visit DontMoveAMussel.ca.

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