

OBWB calls on feds to step up efforts to stop mussels

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6/13/2017



A delegation of municipal representatives from the Okanagan Basin Water Board was in Ottawa earlier this month and met with federal government officials to urge them to take stronger action to prevent the spread of invasive mussels. From left are: Tracy Gray (chair), MP Terry Beech, MP Stephen Fuhr, Juliette Cunningham (vice chair), Peter Waterman (director) and Doug Findlater (past chair and director). Beech is parliamentary secretary to Dominic LeBlanc, the minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard. Fuhr is the MP for Kelowna-Lake Country. (Contributed photo)

Okanagan representatives are calling on the federal government to step up its efforts to prevent the spread of invasive mussels.

Four directors on the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) met with federal officials in Ottawa earlier this month while attending the annual Federation of Canadian Municipalities conference.

The situation is especially worrisome since the discovery in October 2016 of invasive mussels in Montana, the first time that zebra or quagga mussels have been discovered in the Pacific Northwest.

Currently the three westernmost provinces, including B.C., are still believed to be free of invasive mussels that have caused billions of dollars in damage in other parts of North America.

Making the pitch for the OBWB were Chair Tracy Gray, a Kelowna city councillor; Vice Chair Juliette Cunningham, a Vernon councillor; Director and Past Chair Doug Findlater, mayor of West Kelowna; and Director Peter Waterman, mayor of Summerland.

Representing the federal government were MP Terry Beech, the parliamentary secretary to Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard Dominic LeBlanc; MP Stephen Fuhr, Kelowna-Lake Country; and two

department officials.

OBWB wants the federal government to provide targeted funding to match provincial spending for improved invasive mussel education, containment and prevention.

They want the minister to meet with officials of the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) as soon as possible to enhance protection of federally controlled lands, waterways and border crossings through mandatory watercraft inspections.

They want senior federal staff to participate in the Pacific Northwest Economic Region (PNWER) Invasive Species Working Group to co-ordinate efforts by the different levels of government to stop the spread of invasive mussels.

And they want a response letter outlining the minister's decision and actions on the recommendations.

The OBWB representatives emphasized that the cost of managing an infestation is considerably higher than the cost of prevention.

Chair Gray said the two MPs agreed to follow up with CBSA to try to elevate the issue. Beech said the government would have someone attend the PNWER annual summit in Portland, Ore. in July where the mussel issue will be discussed.

"They were very welcoming and open to what we had to say," said Gray.

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Osoyoos Times

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