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By staff1 on February 6, 2018

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A delegation of municipal representatives from the Okanagan Basin Water Board was in Ottawa last June and met with federal government officials to urge them to take stronger action to prevent the spread of invasive mussels. But the OBWB now says it's received no follow-up and it's tired of waiting on the feds. 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)

The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) is turning up the heat on the federal government, which it suggests is dragging its feet in responding to the threat of invasive mussels.

"We are disheartened that the federal government hasn't made this a priority in our area," said OBWB Chair Tracy Gray, noting that the board met with federal officials last June in Ottawa, and they are tired of waiting for a federal response.

"We have had no follow-up communication or commitment on how they would contain the mussels in regions already infested and prevent them from spreading to Western Canada," Gray said in a news release issued Friday.

The OBWB representatives met last June with Terry Beach, the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans; MP Stephen Fuhr, Kelowna-Lake Country; and Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) officials.

They were told that \$43.8 million was allocated to address aquatic invasive species in Canada over five years.

Although the OBWB made the case for some of this to go to invasive mussel prevention, there are other aquatic invasive species threats elsewhere in Canada such as the threat of Asian carp to the Great Lakes.

Based on a 2013 study, the OBWB estimates the economic cost of invasive zebra or quagga mussels to the Okanagan could be at least \$42 million annually.

"We know from that June meeting that there is federal funding for aquatic invasive species and expect that some will go to protecting our region from invasive mussels," Gray said. "That's our goal."

In a letter sent to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale, Fisheries Minister Dominic LeBlanc and Environment Minister Catherine McKenna, Gray says OBWB is concerned that another boating season has gone by and there have been no new steps from the federal government.

She notes that if the \$43.8 million were distributed evenly by region, the annual amount to B.C. would only be \$1.46 million.

In comparison, the B.C. government and its partners from power companies and the Columbia Basin Trust spent \$4.45 million in 2017 for invasive mussel prevention alone, she said, noting that much more is needed.

"We ask how this \$43.8 million is being distributed to contain or prevent the spread of invasive mussels, what occurred in 2017, and what the plans are for 2018-2021," Gray asks in her letter.

"Is the distribution occurring by region, or by invasive species type and who is overseeing this?" she asks.

The OBWB is also calling for extension of the program to inspect watercraft coming across the Canada-U.S. border and for more training of officers from Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA).

They are also asking the federal government to work with provinces to amend regulations, for example to prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species by float planes and water bombers.

Invasive zebra mussels have spread throughout eastern North America, especially around the Great Lakes. They have spread west in Canada as far as Manitoba.

Quagga mussels are also prolific in the Great Lakes area and other eastern waterways and in recent years they have spread in the Southwest United States.

Mussels are spread mainly by recreational watercraft that have not been properly cleaned, drained and dried after use in infested waters.

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