



Fight to keep potentially devastating invasive mussels out of Okanagan gains momentum

By Steve Arstad



Support for efforts to prevent the infestation of local lakes with invasive mussels is on the rise, says Corinne Jackson of the Okanagan Basin Water Board. The federal government has yet to commit to dedicated funding to the efforts. Image Credit: Image Credit: Contributed/US National Parks Service

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PENTICTON - Progress is being made in the fight to keep invasive zebra and quagga mussels out of the Okanagan's lakes.

Okanagan Basin Water Board spokesperson Corinne Jackson says after years of making the request, the province has agreed to dedicate \$1 million annually to fund an inspection program as part of the fight against invasive quagga and zebra mussels.

Another \$750,000 has been made available from the Conservation Officer service in 2018-19, in addition to funding from the board's partners.

The federal government has yet to respond to requests for additional financial support and Jackson says with the boating season underway, the sooner they act they better.

A spokesperson at Kelowna-Lake Country MP Stephen Fuhr's constituency office said the MP is supportive of the mussel control effort and was working on the issue, but currently unable to comment on the prospect of funding.

The Okanagan has so far avoided the plague of mussels that have taken a grip on many lakes in eastern North America, according to the water board's Don't Move a Mussel website. The invasive species of zebra and quagga mussels promote toxic algae, encrust and corrode hard surfaces, clog water intakes and cover beaches with sharp shells, and cause other serious harm to waters in which they become established.

Mussels were introduced to the waters of the Great Lakes in the 1980s after being discharged from European freighters' ballast tanks, and have since spread throughout most of Eastern North America and parts of the American midwest, causing millions of dollars in damage to infrastructure annually.

Jackson says inspection laws at the border have also been initiated after a lobbying effort that began in 2012, expressing kudos to the province for boosting the number of boat inspection stations for each of the past three years.

"We've gone from eight inspection stations in 2016 to 12 in 2018," she says. The stations operate from dusk to dawn or 10 hours a day, except for the province's busiest facility in Golden, which runs 24 hours a day.

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Jackson says the mussel sniffing dog, Kilo, is active again this season, and another mussel sniffing canine is in training for the 2019 season.

"Dogs are incredibly effective at sniffing out these mussels," she says.

"It is not a goal to have 24 hour a day coverage, so everyone needs to continue doing their part," Jackson says.

Any type of watercraft is capable of harbouring mussels, even fishing gear and other equipment used in water.

Visitors to the province should contact the RAPP line upon arrival at 1-877-952-7277 to make arrangements to meet an inspection crew.

"Clean, drain and dry your watercraft, and have the 'talk' with out of town guests bringing their watercraft into the area," she says.

Fines of \$375 can be levied against those ignoring inspection stations, and a fine of up to \$100,000 or a year in jail, or both, can be levied against someone failing to remove the invasive mussels from their watercraft.

The water board is about to launch its annual Don't Move a Mussel public awareness program working in partnership with Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society.

The society's executive director Lisa Scott says this is the seventh year for the aquatic species prevention program, which is primarily funded by the water board and Canada Summer Jobs program.

The society has three staff, one in each regional district, interacting with boaters at 18 launches in the Okanagan. They also spread the Clean, Drain and Dry and Don't Move a Mussel message at boat shows, community events, festivals, fairs and farmers' markets up and down the valley.

For more information, check out the Don't Move a Mussel website.

This story was updated at 11:45 a.m. Thursday, June 21, 2018 to provide additional information, and clarify funding and inspection station operational details.

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