

MEDIA RELEASE

20 December 2019 – For Immediate Release

Shuswap Watershed Council and Okanagan Basin Water Board pen joint letter to new Fisheries Minister, calling for action on Invasive Mussels

The Shuswap Watershed Council (SWC) and Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB), two watershed organizations based in the Interior region of B.C., have sent a letter to the new federal Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, Hon. Bernadette Jordan, to express their ongoing concern about the threat of aquatic invasive Zebra and Quagga mussels and call for more action from the federal government.

“Every year we experience invasive mussel-infested watercraft arriving at our borders – heading to the Okanagan, the Shuswap, and other B.C. locations, with the vast majority coming from mussel-infested waters within Canada. And every year, our water is put at risk – for drinking, for fish and other wildlife. Our famous beaches, our water infrastructure, and more, is also put at risk,” OBWB Chair Sue McKortoff said, explaining the importance of the letter.

Although there are no known infestations of Zebra or Quagga mussels in B.C. or Western Canada, an introduction would have devastating and costly impacts to water quality, fish populations and habitat, water utilities, hydro-electric facilities, beaches, and property values. The cost of managing an infestation is conservatively estimated to be \$42M per year in the Okanagan valley alone; costs that would be borne by local taxpayers and property owners.

Shuswap and Okanagan Lakes are especially at risk of an invasion because they see a large influx of watercraft each summer, including from mussel-infested areas of North America. Additionally, federal research has noted that the Okanagan and Shuswap is at high risk due to warm water temperatures and high calcium content in the waters which increases the chance of the mussels’ survival.

The letter cites a spring 2019 report on Aquatic Invasive Species by the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development which identifies a lack of urgency and intervention by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) in preventing and containing the mussels. More recently, a report from the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans in June 2019 also found that the federal government’s protection of Canadian lakes and waterways against aquatic invasive species is inadequate. An infestation in B.C., the letter states, would cause a catastrophic collapse of Pacific salmon stocks in our waters, which should be a concern to DFO.

“We are very concerned that Zebra or Quagga Mussels could arrive in British Columbia,” says Paul Demenok, Chair of the Shuswap Watershed Council. “We know from the experience of others who are now dealing with the invasive mussels, that the cost of effective prevention is so much smaller than what it costs to manage the



mussels once they arrive. We are lucky. We still have the opportunity to keep them out, but we need stronger support from the federal government on this issue.”

The SWC and OBWB are asking the federal government to build upon a previous financial commitment of \$400,000 in August 2018. Specifically, they are asking for a new investment in B.C. that could support the expansion of three key programs including watercraft inspection, early detection monitoring, and education and outreach. The SWC and OBWB are also asking the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans to contain known mussel infestations by enforcing new prevention measures, such as watercraft inspection and decontamination for travellers leaving infested watersheds, and new measures to prevent floatplanes and amphibious watercraft from transporting aquatic invasive species.

“The nearest known Zebra and Quagga Mussels to B.C., within Canada, are in Manitoba and Ontario,” says Erin Vieira, program manager for the Shuswap Watershed Council. “Although it is illegal to possess or transport aquatic invasive species, there is no requirement for watercraft to be inspected and decontaminated as they leave infested lakes or waterways. This is an opportunity to improve containment and prevent the spread of these mussels.”

“We take this issue seriously and are heavily invested in protecting our waters,” added McKortoff. “For its part, OBWB has run its *‘Don’t Move A Mussel’* outreach and education campaign since 2012, spending more than \$334,000 in local tax dollars on this initiative, and thanks to support from the Okanagan business community, delivered a program worth over \$847,000. It has also provided \$195,000 in local tax dollars between 2013 and 2019 to the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society to assist with direct boater outreach and to conduct mussel monitoring. But we need the federal government to join us. We welcome the opportunity to work with Minister Jordan, and her office, to address this issue. ”

The full letter can be found on the SWC website at www.shuswapwater.ca.

For more information on the mussels, the risks that they pose, and tips to prevent their spread, visit www.DontMoveAMussel.ca.

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Editor: the full letter to Minister Jordan is attached to this news release.

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Hon. Bernadette Jordan
Minister of Fisheries, Oceans, and the Canadian Coast Guard
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6
Sent by e-mail to Bernadette.Jordan@parl.gc.ca

December 17, 2019

Re: Preventing the spread of Aquatic Invasive Mussels to British Columbia

Dear Minister Jordan,

Congratulations on your recent appointment as the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard.

We are writing to express our concern about the threat of a Zebra and Quagga mussel invasion to the pristine lakes of British Columbia, and all of Western Canada. While we acknowledge the August 2018 announcement of federal funding for invasive mussel prevention in B.C., we reiterate our call for greater support and funding.

Although B.C. does not presently have any known infestations of these mussels, an introduction would have devastating and costly impacts to water quality, fish populations and habitat, hydro-electric facilities, water utilities, beaches, and property values. Shuswap and Okanagan lakes are popular tourist destinations and see an influx of watercraft to our region each summer – and each year, watercraft contaminated with the mussels arrive in B.C. As federal government research has noted, we are especially vulnerable due to our warm water temperatures and high calcium content which puts us at greater risk than other regions since these conditions increase the chance of the mussels' survival. A single contaminated watercraft from an infested lake in Ontario or Manitoba could start an irreversible infestation in B.C. Currently, there is no method of eradicating Zebra or Quagga mussels in ecosystems as large and complex as the Shuswap and Okanagan.

An introduction would have a devastating impact on our economies. A 2013 Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) study conservatively estimated an infestation at \$42 million annually in direct costs and lost revenues in the Okanagan alone. Estimates from the Pacific NorthWest Economic Region (PNWER) peg the costs of an invasive mussel infestation at \$500 million annually to the region.

As noted in an earlier letter from the OBWB, invasive mussels would cause a catastrophic collapse of Pacific salmon stocks were they to infest freshwater spawning habitat in the Columbia and Fraser River systems, both at high risk for infestation and ecological damage. A 2017 study by the Pacific Salmon Commission found that the contribution of the commercial and recreational sectors from Pacific salmon averaged \$1.364 billion (USD) in output, \$850 million (USD) in GDP, \$485 million (USD) in labour income, and 12,400 FTE jobs to the Canadian economy. Additionally, Pacific salmon are a vitally important food



and ceremonial fish for several B.C. First Nations. We cannot afford to lose the spawning habitat which makes these important fisheries viable.

To date, we believe the federal government has not taken sufficient action on this issue, nor has it provided equitable funding to stop the spread of invasive Zebra and Quagga mussels. A report on Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) by the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development (2019) is consistent with our concerns about the lack of urgency and intervention by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. More recently, a report from the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans (June 2019) found that the federal government's protection of Canadian lakes and waterways against AIS is inadequate. Additionally, the B.C. government reports that at least 19 infested watercraft were intercepted at provincial borders this summer: further evidence that despite current efforts, the threat of a mussel infestation continues.

Prevention is the best and most cost-effective option. A new federal investment in our province is needed, building upon the financial commitment of \$400,000 provided by your department in August 2018, and could go toward the following prevention strategies:

- Expansion of B.C.'s watercraft inspection program to enable the establishment of more inspection stations around the province's perimeter. Recognizing previous Minister Jonathan Wilkinson's Dec. 13, 2018 response to a letter from the OBWB noting DFO cannot provide financial support for inspections since it "does not have budgetary authority," we recommend Parks Canada provide inspection and decontamination stations at Banff and Jasper National Parks, both protecting the National Parks, and preventing infested watercraft from entering B.C. through those routes.
- Expansion of early detection monitoring programs to enable more water bodies to be regularly tested for invasive mussels
- Expansion of education and outreach programs, complimenting efforts that are already underway.

Concurrent to supporting these programs in B.C., the department needs to take more action to contain mussel infestations and fully enact the Federal Fisheries Act's *Aquatic Invasive Species Regulation*. Such measures should include a requirement that watercraft leaving invasive mussel-infested jurisdictions be inspected and decontaminated to prevent new invasions; the development of new robust measures to prevent floatplanes and amphibious aircraft from transporting aquatic invasive species; and the inclusion of AIS prevention education in the Canadian Boating Licence program.

We take this issue seriously and are heavily invested in protecting our waters. For its part, OBWB has run its Don't Move A Mussel outreach and education campaign since 2012, spending more than \$334,000 in local tax dollars on this initiative, and thanks to support from the Okanagan business community, delivered a program worth over \$847,000. It has also provided \$195,000 in local tax dollars between 2013 and 2019 to the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society to assist with direct boater outreach and to conduct mussel monitoring. Similarly, the Shuswap Watershed Council spent \$42,750 in local tax dollars on monitoring, education and outreach in 2018 and is spending a similar amount in 2019. Both our organizations have significant local experience and broad reach into Shuswap and Okanagan communities that can complement your efforts.



Considering all that is at risk in the Shuswap and Okanagan, and the current likelihood of an invasive mussel infestation, we call on the Government of Canada to take a more active role in protecting our waters. We look forward to working with you to address this threat and thank you for your attention and swift action on this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Demenok".

Paul Demenok
Chair, Shuswap Watershed Council
c/o Fraser Basin Council
200A – 1383 McGill Road
Kamloops, B.C. V2C 6K7
250 314.9660

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sue McKortoff".

Sue McKortoff
Chair, Okanagan Basin Water Board
1450 KLO Road
Kelowna, B.C. V1W 3Z4
250 469.6271

cc:

- Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, responsible for Parks Canada
- Shuswap and Okanagan MPs: Mel Arnold, Tracy Gray, Dan Albas, Richard Cannings
- Federal Critics: Conservative Party – Mel Arnold; NDP – Gord Johns
- Secwepemc Chiefs: Wayne Christian, Oliver Arnouse, Judy Wilson, Cliff Arnouse
- Chiefs Executive Council, Okanagan Nation Alliance
- MLAs: Greg Kylo, Eric Foster, Norm Letnick, Steve Thomson, Ben Stewart, Dan Ashton, Linda Larson
- Regional District Chairs for Columbia Shuswap, North Okanagan, Central Okanagan, Okanagan-Similkameen, and Thompson-Nicola
- Mayors of Okanagan and Shuswap municipalities
- Matt Morrison, Chief Executive Officer, Pacific NorthWest Economic Region
- Gail Wallin, Executive Director, Invasive Species Council of BC
- Chambers of Commerce: Kelowna, Vernon, Salmon Arm, South Shuswap, and North Shuswap
- Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association



About the Shuswap Watershed Council

The [Shuswap Watershed Council](#) (SWC) was established in 2014 as a watershed-based partnership that enhances water quality and safe recreation in the Shuswap. There are 18 SWC members that represent three regional districts, two municipalities, the Secwepemc Nation, two provincial government agencies, and Shuswap communities. The SWC is a collaborative, non-regulatory group. It works alongside organizations that have regulatory roles in managing the Shuswap watershed, complimenting their work and carefully avoiding duplication. Its primary mandate is to enhance, protect, and advocate for water quality in the Shuswap watershed.

About the Okanagan Basin Water Board

The [Okanagan Basin Water Board](#) (OBWB) was instituted in 1970 as a collaboration of the three Okanagan regional districts (North Okanagan, Central Okanagan, and Okanagan-Similkameen) to provide leadership on valley-wide water issues. The board is made up of 12 directors including three from each regional district, as well as a representative from the Okanagan Nation Alliance, the Water Supply Association of BC, and the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council (WSC). The WSC is a cross-disciplinary technical advisory body to the board. Advised by the council, the board delivers programs and activities to promote coordinated water management throughout the basin.