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B.C. must 'step up efforts' to prevent invasive mussels from reaching B.C. lakes: water board

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The Okanagan Basin Water Board is calling for tighter restrictions from the province to protect B.C. waters from invasive zebra and quagga mussels.

The water board sent a letter to B.C. Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy George Heyman, outlining its concerns and repeating its call for tighter regulations, according to a news release.

"In light of the current COVID-19 crisis, it is apparent – more than ever – the devastating economic impacts that an invasion of these mussels would have on the Okanagan and the province, especially while we try to recover from the impacts of this pandemic," writes water board chair Sue McKortoff.

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A study conducted for the water board in 2013 determined an infestation would cost the Okanagan at least \$42 million to just manage, according to the release.

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"We recognize the incredibly difficult economic position that this pandemic has caused for the government and people of B.C." the letter continues. "That is why we continue to urge your government to take all necessary action to prevent the introduction of species which could significantly add to the economic fallout."

The water board is calling on the province to:

1. Prioritize legislation to require all watercraft owners to remove the drain plug of their watercraft prior to transporting it.
2. Increase inspection station funding back to at least 2017 levels of \$4.45 million per year.
3. Renew the public-private funding partnerships which help to fund the inspection system and are set to expire in 2021.
4. Establish a working group to explore options and partnerships to enable legislation which would require all watercraft entering B.C. to report for an inspection station prior to entering provincial waters.

Similar calls to action were sent in July 2019 which prompted a response from Heyman, indicating that "pull the plug" legislation was being evaluated, as well as legislation to require incoming watercraft to report for inspection before launching.

"Although we may not see the Canada-U.S. border reopening soon due to COVID-19, as summer approaches we will likely see more inter-provincial travel with watercraft," said McKortoff in the news release.



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"For at least the last three years, the number one source of infested watercraft coming into B.C. has been Ontario." Sixteen of the 22 mussel-fouled watercraft intercepted coming into B.C. last year were from Ontario, according to the news release.

"These stats, and the fact that there are still gaps in B.C.'s inspection program, require the province to step up efforts," she added in the release, noting the water board and the Shuswap Watershed Council sent a similar letter to Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Bernadette Jordan, in December. That letter also provided recommended actions to prevent the further spread of invasive mussels into B.C.

No response has been received at this time, the water board said.

The water board is preparing to launch the Don't Move A Mussel campaign in preparation for an increase in water recreation activities with the Victoria Day long weekend and as summer arrives.

Learn more about the mussels, the risks to the Okanagan, find prevention tips, information on what to do if bringing watercraft into B.C. and how you can help protect our waters [here](#).

From now until late October, B.C. Conservation Officer Service inspectors will check boats for aquatic invasive species and educate people about the importance of Clean, Drain and Dry - a preventative step that all boaters should practise when moving between lakes in B.C., according to the province in a news release.

While most provincial boat launches are now open, the province reminds people that now is not the time for non-essential travel and to stay close to home. Due to current travel restrictions, the risk for invasive mussels entering B.C. is expected to be lower.

Piloted in 2015, the Invasive Mussel Defence program consists of three main components: watercraft inspections, lake monitoring, and public outreach and education. The Conservation Officer Service enforces the program and has two detection dogs, Kilo and Major. The dogs are primarily on the road searching for invasive mussels at the inspection stations.

Last year, more than 52,000 inspections were conducted that resulted in 22 mussel-fouled boats coming from Ontario, Michigan, Utah and North Carolina and were destined for the Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island, Kootenays, Thompson-Nicola and Skeena regions. The program received advanced notification of 17 of the 22 mussel-fouled boats either from another jurisdiction or by Canada Border Services agents.

The conservation service reminds people that it is mandatory for anyone transporting a watercraft in B.C. to stop at an open inspection station. Failing to stop can result in a \$345 fine. Last year, 116 violation tickets were issued to motorists failing to stop at inspection stations, according to the province.

People are encouraged to report watercraft suspected of transporting invasive mussels to the Report All

Poachers and Polluters line at 1-877-952-7277. To determine if a boat is high risk and should be decontaminated, contact: COS.Aquatic.Invasive.Species@gov.bc.ca.

People can also report other potential invasive species through the provincial [Report Invasives App](#) online.