

OKANAGAN BASIN WATER BOARD URGES PROVINCE TO CONTINUE FIGHTING INVASIVE MUSSEL

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Press release from the Okanagan Basin Water Board on May 13, 2020:

The Okanagan Basin Water Board wants to ensure the COVID-19 pandemic doesn't sideline efforts to protect B.C. waters from invasive zebra and quagga mussels as the province prepares for increased water recreation. In response, the board has forwarded a letter to B.C. Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy George Heyman, outlining its concerns and repeating its call for tighter regulations.

"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 Board Chair Sue McKortoff. A study conducted for the OBWB in 2013 determined an infestation would cost the Okanagan at least \$42 million to just manage. "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."

Specifically, the Water Board is calling on the government of B.C. 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 Min. 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," explained McKortoff. "For at least the last three years, the number one source of infested watercraft coming into B.C. has been Ontario." Indeed, 16 of the 22 mussel-fouled watercraft intercepted coming into B.C. last year were from Ontario.

"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, noting OBWB 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.

As for the OBWB, its Okanagan WaterWise program is once again preparing to launch the "Don't Move A Mussel" campaign in response to an increase in watercraft inspections with the Victoria Council

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 at www.DontMoveAMussel.ca.