



*Chamber fearful invasive mussels may enter Okanagan on Canadian boats. (BC Government/file photo)*

By Vernon Matters Staff/Greater Vernon Chamber

## Unwanted mussels could tag along during COVID travel, warns Chamber

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The Greater Vernon Chamber of Commerce is fearful invasive mussels may hitch a ride with Canadian travellers to the Okanagan during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Canadian tourists have been encouraged to travel within Canada which, the Chamber believes, could inadvertently lead to the spread of aquatic invasive species.

The Chamber has written to federal Fisheries Minister Bernadette Jordan and Public Safety Minister Bill Blair about the negative impact invasive species, such as quagga and zebra mussels, could have on the Okanagan Valley.

“The spread of aquatic invasive mussels poses a significant threat to the Okanagan’s ecosystem, lifestyle and economy, and the potential for an infestation is very real as Canadians are encouraged to travel and explore this great nation during the pandemic,” said Krystin Kempton, Greater Vernon Chamber of Commerce president.

To reduce the threat, the Chamber insists that government campaigns promoting travel among Canadians must emphasize that all visitors need to clean, drain and dry their watercraft and equipment before entering B.C.

The Chamber believes there is also a need to strengthen the Pleasure Craft Operator Card course by providing participants with information about AIS inspection stations and the need to drain water from equipment and keep drain plugs out during transport.

“U.S. citizens entering B.C. to reach Alaska could also put our lakes at risk, particularly given the recent increase in watercraft arriving in Montana infested with zebra and quagga mussels,” said Kempton. “We urge the government to provide the Canadian Border Services Agency with the necessary resources to prevent the infestation of Canadian waters by watercraft and equipment crossing our border.”

The Okanagan Basin Water Board estimates the annual loss to tourism revenue from invasive mussels could range from \$12 to \$22 million.

An infestation would also mean people living along the waterfront could experience a decrease in real estate values (about \$10 million a year) as their beaches could be covered by razor-sharp shells.

And higher taxes may be required as municipalities struggle to maintain water utilities with costly treatments to remove mussels from infrastructure.