

March 4, 2021

NEWS RELEASE

OKANAGAN IS #1 DESTINATION FOR MUSSEL-INFESTED WATERCRAFT – WATER BOARD CALLS FOR STRONGER PROTECTION

Kelowna, B.C. – As the #1 destination for invasive mussel-infested watercraft in B.C., the Okanagan Basin Water Board is once again calling on the province to bring in legislation to help protect Okanagan waters and waterways around B.C. Today, the local government agency sent a letter to B.C.’s Minister of Environment and Climate Change, George Heyman, with a list of six calls to action.

“Being the #1 destination for zebra or quagga-mussel infested watercraft is not what we want to be known for,” says Sue McKortoff, Chair of the OBWB and Mayor of Osoyoos. “We need stronger measures to protect Okanagan and B.C. waters, the source of community drinking water, home to a recovering fishery, iconic beaches and water sports.”

According to the province’s own reporting, 16 watercraft entering B.C. this past inspection season were confirmed carrying adult invasive mussels. Twelve of these were from Ontario, and one was from Manitoba. (The other three were being commercially transported from the U.S.). Of these 16, at least seven were headed to the Okanagan. Also of concern is information shared at this week’s OBWB board meeting from its partner, the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society (OASISS). According to the group, only 67% of out-of-province boaters they surveyed in the Okanagan last summer reported stopping at an inspection station. This survey included socially-distanced interactions with 361 watercraft at 11 boat launches.

“After an extensive examination of where our vulnerabilities lie, we have developed a list of critical recommendations that can help build up our defences,” added McKortoff.

The six recommendations include:

1. Restore core inspection program funding to at least 2017 levels of \$3.8 million and adjust for inflation going forward.
2. Introduce “pull-the-plug” legislation and supporting regulations for enforcement this summer.
3. Review and update the provincial Early Detection, Rapid Response plan (EDRR), to include specific long-term planning for waterbody or regional quarantines once an infestation is found in B.C.
4. Provide toolkits and resources for local governments to conduct vulnerability assessments, and to implement mitigation measures like retrofitting in-water infrastructure.
5. Introduce legislation to require all out of province watercraft to be inspected prior to being launched in B.C. waters.
6. Provide additional funding to invasive species groups in high-risk regions for monitoring, outreach and education.

“Working with many partners, the province has come a long way in protecting our waters from a mussel infestation,” the letter reads. “Closing these additional gaps, by adopting the recommendations noted here, will help bolster those efforts and provide an increased return on investment as we save millions of dollars by remaining invasive mussel-free.”

A study for the OBWB found an invasive mussel infestation would cost the Okanagan at least \$42 million annually to just manage. In response, the Water Board and its Okanagan WaterWise outreach program

launched the “[Don't Move A Mussel](#)” campaign in 2013 and has funded additional outreach and mussel monitoring by OASISS. In all, the OBWB has spent over \$565,000, and thanks to media partners has delivered a campaign worth over \$847,000.

“Our own telephone survey this fall, and provincial feedback, has indicated that mussel awareness is very high in our valley, but that is no substitution for increased regulations, enforcement and boots-on-the-ground outreach and monitoring,” added McKortoff. “We can’t afford to let down our guard now.”

Please find attached, the OBWB’s letter to the province with recommendations.

For more information on zebra and quagga mussels, the risks to the Okanagan, and how to prevent their spread, please visit www.DontMoveAMussel.ca.

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Hon. George Heyman
B.C. Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy
PO Box 9360 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, B.C. V8W 9M2

March 4, 2021

Re: Legislative Changes to Prevent Invasive Mussels

Dear Minister Heyman,

Thank you for your correspondence of June 11th responding to our continued calls for action to prevent the spread of invasive zebra and quagga mussels into British Columbia. I am writing again on behalf of the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) to call for stronger provincial legislation to help prevent the introduction of these mussels and other aquatic invasive species into B.C.

Each year the OBWB conducts an analysis of existing gaps in provincial and federal action on this issue, and we provide feedback through letters to the provincial government and your federal counterparts. Since 2015, we have seen and acknowledged significant progress on this file from the Province of B.C. Despite this progress, identified gaps continue to persist with action deferred by both levels of senior government. We recognize that your ministry is working on a Watershed Security Strategy for B.C., and this issue is one of the greatest watershed security issues in the Okanagan. According to the province's own reporting, 16 watercraft entering B.C. this past inspection season were confirmed carrying adult invasive mussels. Twelve of these were from Ontario, and one was from Manitoba. (The other three were being commercially transported from the U.S.). Of these 16, at least seven were headed to the Okanagan. Also concerning, our partners at the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society reported that only 67% of out-of-province boaters they surveyed in the Okanagan last summer reported stopping at an inspection station. This survey included socially-distanced interactions with 361 watercraft at 11 boat launches.

After a thorough review of the existing provincial mussel inspection station program, as well as the existing relevant legislation and allocation of resources, we have identified six key gaps that can be addressed by your government with some starting before the 2021 boating season. The timeline for implementing these measures is critical due to COVID-19, since we saw increased interprovincial recreational travel in the summer of 2020, while at the same time public outreach was limited due to public safety measures. There is no reason to expect less interprovincial travel in 2021 and so the threat of an infestation remains.

Recommendations:

1. Restore core inspection program funding to at least 2017 levels of \$3.8 million and adjust for inflation going forward.

We understand that the province is conducting a new and more thorough economic vulnerability assessment for invasive mussels that should acknowledge the value of preventing a mussel infestation. The province cannot afford to allow the significant economic damage that will occur if we fail to adequately fund prevention. This is more important than ever, given the increased risk from interprovincial travel, and the ongoing fragility of the provincial economy – already suffering from COVID-19 (another biological invasion).

2. Introduce “pull-the-plug” legislation and supporting regulations for enforcement this summer.

As we have previously recommended, legislation is needed which requires all watercraft owners to remove their drain plug prior to transporting a vessel on roads. This legislation will serve three purposes:

- Prevent infested water from being transported into or within the province;
- Educate watercraft owners on the critical behaviour to Clean, Drain, Dry their vessels; and
- Allow enforcement officers to identify high-risk watercraft that have not been properly drained at source waters.

3. Review and update the provincial Early Detection, Rapid Response plan (EDRR), to include specific long-term planning for waterbody or regional quarantines once an infestation is found in B.C.

The existing EDRR plan, published in 2015 should be updated to include the latest scientific information available, as well as to incorporate changes to legislation that have occurred since 2015. It should also be expanded to include planning for waterbody and watershed level responses, such as quarantines to stop a new infestation from spreading between B.C.’s major river systems. The current EDRR plan ends (“exits”) at the time a significant infestation is established in a lake (and “eradication is not achievable”). An infestation in one part of the province does not mean we should let our guard down and allow the mussels to spread to other regions.

4. Provide toolkits and resources for local governments to conduct vulnerability assessments, and to implement mitigation measures like retrofitting in-water infrastructure.

This new call to action will educate and directly support local governments in understanding and mitigating the risks posed by invasive mussels. An infestation would have significant detrimental effects on local government infrastructure - most importantly on the supply of sufficient, clean drinking water. A toolkit and clear direction from the province using up-to-date science would allow local governments to retrofit old infrastructure, or design new infrastructure to mitigate the risks of an infestation. For example, by moving chlorinators to a water point-of-intake, a water utility could prevent mussel larvae from surviving to clog the pipes and equipment within the facility.

5. Introduce legislation to require all out of province watercraft to be inspected prior to being launched in B.C. waters.

Since May, 2016, OBWB has called for legislation requiring all out-of-province watercraft to report for an inspection prior to launching in provincial waters. To date, we have not received a satisfactory answer as to why the province is not working to implement this action. Several other jurisdictions have legislation and resources in place for this purpose, demonstrating that it is not a matter of financial or jurisdictional limitation, nor a logistical or enforcement impossibility. For example, in Idaho a boat sticker program requires all watercraft owners to purchase an annual sticker for just \$10 for in-state motorized watercraft, \$30 for out-of-state motorized, and \$7 for non-motorized craft. Similar to B.C.’s existing hunting and fishing fees, which go back into protecting the resources, Idaho’s sticker fees pay for the inspection program which protects the waterbodies for users. A

similar program in B.C. is achievable given the political will to protect our water. We have previously called on the Government of B.C. to prepare a business case for this legislation, and we reiterate that call.

6. Provide additional funding to invasive species groups in high-risk regions for monitoring, outreach and education.

In B.C., much of the important work of increasing water awareness among water recreationists and monitoring waterbodies for new infestations falls onto regional non-profit invasive species groups. These groups work in partnership with the provincial government, sharing information and providing consistent messaging across the province. However, as with many non-profits, much of their time is spent fundraising and trying to maintain operations and they are chronically underfunded. We call on the province to provide ongoing funding to these groups to support increased monitoring and outreach efforts. Funding should be administered through a provincial program, and go directly to the regional groups.

Working with many partners, the province has come a long way in protecting our waters from a mussel infestation. Closing these additional gaps, by adopting the recommendations noted here, will help bolster those efforts and provide an increased return on investment as we save millions of dollars by remaining invasive mussel-free. A study for the OBWB found an invasive mussel infestation would cost the Okanagan at least \$42 million annually to just manage. OBWB is invested in keeping the mussels out and has been funding our public awareness campaign, "[Don't Move A Mussel](#)," since 2013 and supporting the province's "Clean, Drain, Dry" message to water recreationists. Surveys have shown mussel awareness is high in our valley, but that is no substitution for increased regulations, enforcement and boots-on-the-ground outreach and monitoring. We can't afford to let down our guard now.

The OBWB will be reaching out to partners, local governments and First Nations, and the public, to support the province in taking action that demonstrates that invasive mussel prevention is a priority.

We look forward to hearing your response through action in the legislature in the near future.

Sincerely,



Sue McKortoff, Chair
Okanagan Basin Water Board

CC:

- Okanagan MLAs: Harwinder Sandhu, Norm Letnick, Renee Merrifield, Ben Stewart, Dan Ashton, Roly Russell
- Okanagan Nation Alliance, Chiefs Executive Council
- Okanagan Local Government Chairs and Mayors
- Okanagan MPs: Mel Arnold, Tracy Gray, Dan Albas, Richard Cannings
- Pacific NorthWest Economic Region: Matt Morrison, Chief Executive Officer
- Invasive Species Council of B.C.: Gail Wallin, Executive Director
- Okanagan Chambers of Commerce
- Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association