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## Mussels could ruin beaches

### Water board warns of unwalkable beaches if mussels aren't stopped

Rob Gibson - Mar 9, 2022 / 5:23 pm



Photo: OBWB

An invasive mussel and inspecting dog

The Okanagan Basin Water Board is calling on the provincial government to bolster the B.C. Invasive Mussel Defence Program.

With boating season right around the corner and COVID-19 travel restrictions easing, OBWB sent a letter to B.C. environment minister George Heyman with a list of six calls to action.

Since 2015, the mussel defence program says they have prevented 137 infested watercraft from entering provincial waters, conducting more than 220,000 inspections.

"Many of the infested watercraft were headed to high-risk Okanagan waters. Still, gaps remain in prevention," says the letter, which goes on to note that some motorists with watercraft do not stop at mandatory inspections stations, raising the question of how many more boats come in outside of inspection hours.

According to last year's provincial mussel inspection numbers, the Okanagan is the top destination for watercraft/

"If we are B.C.'s number one destination for incoming mussel-infested watercraft, and we are encouraging tourism, we need to be better prepared," said Sue McKortoff board chair and mayor of Osoyoos.

The letter also goes on to state that boat sales have increased over the past few years as people stayed closer to home due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. Now with the border opening up, it's expected more people will be coming to the Okanagan with their water toys, increasing the chances of invasive mussels being introduced to B.C. waters.

A study in 2013 found a mussel infestation in the region would cost \$42M a year to manager.

The OBWB's six recommendations include:

1. Maintain IMDP core program funding at 2021 levels of minimum \$3.5 million per year, adjusted for inflation going forward.
2. Introduce "pull-the-plug" legislation, requiring all watercraft to remove drain plugs prior to travelling on B.C. roads.
3. Review and update B.C.'s 2014 Early Detection, Rapid Response (EDRR) Plan for invasive mussels, and provide a window for public consultation prior to final publishing.
4. Provide toolkits and resources for local governments to conduct vulnerability assessments and put in place 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.

"If invasive mussels arrive here, it's not just people who drive boats who will be affected. It will affect everyone," cautioned McKortoff.

"When the mussels were introduced to Lake Winnipeg, it took only two years for the molluscs to reproduce in such numbers that beaches became foul-smelling and un-walkable, she added. "Can you imagine not taking your kids or grandkids to the beach in summer?"