

OBWB asks province to enforce its Invasive Mussel Defence Program

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Kilo demonstrates his mussel-detection skills with handler Sgt. Josh Lockwood. Photo OBWB

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On the heels of record setting watercraft sales and easing pandemic restrictions, the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) is anticipating an extra busy Okanagan boating season and is asking the province to step up inspection and enforcement measures to prevent widespread invasive mussel infestations in high-risk Okanagan waters.

On Mar. 9, the OBWB sent a letter to George Heyman, B.C.'s Minister of Environment and Climate Change, with six recommendations to bolster its IMDP program:

- Maintain Invasive Mussel Defence Program (IMDP) core program funding at 2021 levels at a minimum of \$3.5 million per year, adjusted for inflation going forward;
- Introduce “pull-the-plug” legislation, requiring all watercraft to remove drain plugs prior to travelling on B.C. roads;
- Review and update B.C.'s 2014 Early Detection Rapid Response Plan for invasive mussels, and provide a window for public consultation prior to final publishing;
- Provide toolkits and resources for local governments to conduct vulnerability assessments and put in place mitigation measures like retrofitting in-water infrastructure;
- Introduce legislation to require all out-of-province watercraft to be inspected prior to being launched in B.C. waters; and
- Provide additional funding to invasive species groups in high-risk regions for monitoring, outreach, and education.

Since 2015, the IMDP has prevented 137 infested watercraft from entering provincial waters by conducting more than 220,000 inspections.

“Many of the infested watercraft were headed to high-risk Okanagan waters. Still, gaps remain in prevention,” the letter states.

Driving these concerns are statistics that show there are record numbers of new watercraft owners on both sides of the border. And with everyone, everywhere, itching to get back to doing all the things people used to do in increasing number, the OBWB sees a real potential threat looming for Okanagan lakes and waterways.

The OBWB states in its letter that there are still far too many motorists with their watercraft who are failing to stop at designated inspection stations. Inspectors intercepted 17 zebra or quagga mussel-fouled watercraft this past summer during periods when the stations were open with much less traffic on the road.

It further raises concerns about how many more infected boats are entering the Okanagan outside of inspection hours, echoed by Osoyoos Mayor Sue McKortoff. “If invasive mussels arrived here, it’s not just people who drive boats who will be affected, it will affect everyone,” she said.

“Once these mussels enter a lake, they become a recurring maintenance expense for in-lake infrastructure, like water lines, docks, and bridges. When they were introduced into Lake Winnipeg, it took only two years to reproduce in such large numbers that the beaches became foul smelling and un-walkable,” concluded McKortoff.