

Province rejects mandatory watercraft invasive mussel inspections

Environment minister says other options being pursued

BARRY GERDING / Apr. 5, 2022 5:40 a.m. / NEWS



The ministry of environment has stopped short of adopting the Okanagan Basin Water Board recommendation of mandatory watercraft inspections for detection of invasive mussels. (File photo)

A proposal requiring all watercraft entering B.C. to be inspected for invasive zebra and quagga mussels is not being actively pursued by the province, says Environment Minister George Heyman.

Heyman says the province has learned from other jurisdictions with similar legislation in place that “this

approach is very challenging to enforce and as a result, their focus has been on education and awareness.”

The minister says the government will continue to prioritize public education and outreach, optimize a perimeter defence approach and investigate the potential of ‘pull the plug’ legislation, which exists in Alberta requiring watercraft owners to remove the drain plug from their boat every time it is pulled out of the water and being transported.

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Heyman made the comments in a letter of response to a request from the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) sent in a letter March 8 to Victoria calling for the province to step up mussel monitoring on boats entering B.C. from outside the province.

In his response, Heyman said the government is “working hard” to maintain the \$3.5 million budget for the Invasive Mussel Defence Program in 2021.

Saying negotiations are underway to renew agreements with funding partners that expire this year, Heyman also revealed a \$100,000 funding commitment from Fisheries and Oceans Canada and \$250,000 from the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries.

He added that the hiring and training of Aquatic Invasive Species inspectors have been initiated for this year, and several inspection stations will be operational in early April along the province’s eastern border.

The level of IMDP operations for the boating season, May to September, is still being confirmed, Heyman noted.

“The process by which we engage with our partners has not yet been finalized, and we appreciate your early thoughts,” he told the OBWB.

Heyman said mussel inspectors were in place at seven inspection stations and two roving stations from April 1 to Oct. 24 in 2021.

Crews completed about 33,300 inspections and interacted with more than 61,600 people to promote Clean, Drain and Dry mussel transportation protective practices.

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Of the total watercraft inspected, 244 were identified as high-risk while adult invasive mussels were confirmed on 17 inspected watercraft. Conservation officers issued 85 violation tickets and 45 warnings to motorists for failing to stop at an inspection station.

The environment minister’s response is on the agenda for discussion at the upcoming OBWB meeting on Tuesday, April 5.

In a report to the board, James Littlely, operations and grants manager, raised some points for debate.

“As the provinces continue to be reluctant to implement mandatory inspections for out of province watercraft, it may be possible for Okanagan local governments to restrict local lake access sites to in-province watercraft and to out of province watercraft that have proof of inspection through the provincial IMPD program,” stated his report to the board.

The OBWB has actively pushed for more stringent watercraft inspection protocols because of concerns that a mussel infestation in Okanagan Lake would have a devastating economic impact.

A study for the OBWB found an invasive mussel infestation would cost the Okanagan at least \$42 million annually to just manage.