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CANADA

'Largest-ever decontamination': B.C. crews track down mussel-infested barge from eastern Canada

By Doyle Potenteau · Global News
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As of July 3rd, 5 watercraft contaminated with invasive mussels were intercepted coming into British Columbia. Two headed to the Okanagan, two to the Lower Mainland and one for Vancouver Island. — Jul 8, 2022

A barge from Ontario was stopped last month from potentially infesting B.C. waters with invasive mussels.

On Saturday, the Ministry of Environment said B.C.'s Conservation Officer Service (COS) achieved its largest-ever invasive mussel decontamination after learning about an infested barge heading west.

According to the ministry, the barge from Lake Ontario was headed to a Lower Mainland waterway for industrial use. Enter B.C.'s Invasive Mussel Defence Program.

READ MORE: B.C.'s invasive mussel defence program intercepts 5 contaminated boats from Ontario

"They knew the consequences of allowing the barge in B.C. waters could have significant impacts on local ecosystems and infrastructure because the invasive mussel could establish itself and overtake native species," said the ministry.

"Inspectors tracked down the trucking company and its load, a massive barge being transported in two 40-foot-long (12 metres) sections, each 10 feet (three metres) high and 10 feet wide."

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A close-up view of the infested barge from Lake Ontario. B.C. Conservation Officer Service

The ministry said the barge was redirected to a warehouse in Richmond for full decontamination, "which was the largest of its kind for invasive zebra mussels since the program started in 2015"

Inspectors from the Okanagan and Lower Mainland were assembled, with the ministry saying they used specialized equipment to remove thousands of invasive mussels during approximately 10 hours of work in two days.



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"Many of the mussels were viable, which means they could multiply in B.C. waters if given the chance. That has yet to happen in the province," said the ministry.

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"This was the largest, most significant discovery of zebra mussels on a watercraft our teams had ever experienced," said COS Insp. Dave Webster. "To decontaminate the vessel, we required a specialized operational plan and space due to the sheer size."

Webster said he was proud of how quickly everyone was mobilized to stop the infested barge from reaching B.C. waters.

"This is a testament to the success of the Invasive Mussel Defence Program and its coordinated approach with our neighbouring provinces to tackle the threat of this invasive species," said Webster.



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The ministry said the barge was also issued a mandatory 30-day quarantine period, which ended this week.

"This incredible work shows the value of our program and staff's dedication to making it effective," said environment minister George Heyman.

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"The fact that B.C. received notification from several western provinces shows how effective this approach is with multiple layers of protection through collective and collaborative prevention efforts across Western Canada and the U.S."



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The ministry says some of the mussel samples will be used to train two detection dogs, Kilo and Major, both of which are German shepherds.

The ministry said in 2021, the Invasive Mussel Defence Program made 33,000 inspections, with 244 identified as high risk. It also said that 100 decontamination orders were issued, and that 12 watercraft were handed quarantine periods to meet the required drying time.

It also said COS inspectors completed 153 decontaminations in 2021.

For more about B.C.'s Invasive Mussel Defence Program, or clean, drain and dry, visit the province's website.