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Okanagan water board sounding alarm for potential mussel infestation

The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) is sounding the alarm and encouraging boaters to be cautious.

A report by the Government of BC suggests that a zebra or quagga mussel infestation would cost the province \$64-\$129 million annually, but OBWB says this does not take all factors into account.



Photo Credit: OBWB-OkWaterWise
Mussel samples

“For more than 10 years, one of the board’s gravest concerns has been a potential infestation of invasive zebra and quagga mussels establishing in BC waterways,” the OBWB writes in a letter addressed to Nathan Cullen, the minister of water, land and resource stewardship, and George Heyman, the minister of environment and climate change strategy.

“Your latest report brings even more urgency to this matter, especially in the Okanagan.”

According to the OBWB, mussels are most often spread via infested watercraft, and provincial statistics show a large proportion of mussel-fouled watercraft from out-of-province are headed to the Okanagan Valley.

Due to having calcium-rich waters, the Okanagan is at a high risk for an infestation, as well as all the costs and impacts associated with one.



Photo Credit: OBWB-OkWaterWise
Conservation officer Sgt. Cynthia Mann with K9 Major

The *Potential Economic Impact of Zebra and Quagga Mussels in BC* report details the potential impacts of invasive mussels on hydro facilities, irrigation and infrastructure, municipal water treatment facilities, domestic water intakes, losses in property values and property taxes, tourism, boats and marinas.

“However, the report does not, and probably could not, calculate the terrible impacts these mussels would cause to our natural systems,” the OBWB continues in the letter.

“Even more so, we recognize that the estimated costs do not include many of the priceless aspects to our environment and quality of life that would be lost if these mussels become established in BC.”

The OBWB says an economic study cannot quantify the impacts to children who would grow up missing the experience of playing along the beaches and swimming in the lakes free from piles of razor-sharp mussel shells.

“It cannot quantify the harm the mussels will cause to the populations of sockeye and Chinook salmon that are being restored back from the brink of extinction by the efforts of the Okanagan Nation Alliance and their partners,” the OBWB adds.

“It cannot quantify the losses to the health and environmental quality of our beautiful lake system, a critical source of drinking water to a growing population.”

In addition, the OBWB says an infestation would lead to required inspections of all watercraft and an inevitable need to quarantine lakes.



Photo Credit: OBWB-OkWaterWise
BC mussel inspector in Radium

The OBWB first sounded the alarm for mussels in 2012, and in 2013 launched its [Don’t Move A Mussel](#) campaign to raise awareness.

It then partnered with the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society, providing funds to conduct outreach to watercraft owners, to help spread the message and encourage the use of Clean, Drain, Dry protocols.

In 2015, the Government of BC started its mussel inspection program and has intercepted mussel-fouled watercraft on their way into the province each year since.

“As far as we know, there are no invasive mussels that have made it into Okanagan lakes,” says Corinne Jackson, the communications director of the OBWB.

“But keeping it this way requires extreme vigilance.”