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TROUBLING REPORT ON MUSSELS

Okanagan Basin Water Board says invasives report 'deeply troubling'

Madeline Baker · Jun 17, 2023 / 4:00 am



Photo: OBWB

Conserv. Officer Sgt. Cynthia Mann with K9 Major.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) has worked tirelessly to educate and warn the public about the risk posed to BC's aquatic ecosystems by invasive zebra and quagga mussels since 2012, and now a recent report by the provincial government has confirmed many of their worst fears.

In a letter to BC Minister for Water, Land and Resource Stewardship Nathan Cullen and Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy George Hayman, the OBWB thanked the government for their long-awaited and, in their words, "deeply troubling" report on the potential impact of an invasive mussel infestation.

The government report estimates that such an infestation could cost the province anywhere from \$64 to \$129 million annually as a result of damage to hydro facilities, irrigation infrastructure, municipal water treatment facilities and domestic water intakes, boats and marinas, and more nebulous measures such as tourism in lake-adjacent communities.

Zebra and quagga mussels were first introduced to Canadian water systems in the 1980s, when transcontinental shipping vessels would travel up the St. Lawrence River with live mussels in their ballast water, which was then flushed into the Great Lakes. They have since spread from Quebec and Ontario to be found in Manitoba water systems.

Because the mussels are only a few millimeters in size and survive so well in standing water or even moist environments, they can easily hide inside watercraft or attached to their outer hulls for weeks and repopulate when they enter a new body of water. Their fast rate of reproduction soon allows them to choke out other species and dominate the habitat.

These are all risks that the OBWB have previously voiced in the messaging of their Don't Move A Mussel and Clean, Drain, Dry campaigns, the latter of which was a partnership with the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society to inform watercraft owners of the best procedures to prevent accidental contamination of local lakes and water systems.

Now that the provincial government has confirmed the massive financial losses that would follow an infestation, the OBWB are reminding them and the public that "an economic study cannot quantify the impacts to our children and grandchildren 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. It cannot quantify the losses to the health and environmental quality of our beautiful lake system. [It] cannot qualify the disruption of life caused by the inevitable need to quarantine lakes, the required inspections of all watercraft, or the delays and trouble to the general public."

The BC government has been doing their part to mitigate this risk since 2015 when they began their mussel inspection program to intercept contaminated watercraft at various border crossings before they could drop anchor in BC waterways.

In that time, not one year has passed without at least one vessel needing to be pulled over and decontaminated.



Photo: OBWB

B.C. mussel inspector at Radium with invasive mussels sample.

As previously reported by the *Times Chronicle* in 2022, one watercraft en route to BC from Ontario turned out to be the biggest decontamination job ever faced in western Canada. Conservation Officers from Penticton had to join the effort in Richmond and even after a thorough cleaning, the two barge pieces still needed to spend 10 days in quarantine.

Sgt. Josh Lockwood, NCO North Okanagan Operation, Conservation Officer Service, said at the time that the barge "should've been decontaminated at the point of origin. Once it came out of the water in Ontario it should've been done, that's the law for all boats coming out of Ontario."

The fact that some people transporting boats from outside of BC continue to flout their own decontamination laws is a large part of the reason for OBWB's dedication to mitigating risks from within the province.

"The only way a mussel invasion will be prevented is through vigilant action by your ministries," said the OBWB in their letter to the BC government. "[We have] provided many specific calls to action in the past. We are grateful for those you have acted upon, and we encourage you to go further and make this a top priority for both your ministries."

OBWB Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears agreed that the costs of an infestation would be "appalling" both financially and in terms of quality of life, for residents and visitors alike.

"I love the beaches and the clean water," she said plainly, "and I don't want to lose them."



Photo: OBWB-OkWaterWise

Invasive mussel samples.

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Typos



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