

January 18, 2024

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OKANAGAN WATER BOARD URGES FEDS TO SUPPORT INVASIVE MUSSEL PREVENTION WHILE THERE'S TIME

Kelowna, B.C. – Syilx Territory – The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) has learned that the federal government may be cutting funds which support invasive mussel inspections in B.C., despite recently learning that the threat of these mussels is now closer than ever to the still mussel-free province. In response, the board has sent a letter to the Ministers of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Environment and Climate Change, and Public Safety, Democratic Institutions and Intergovernmental Affairs, and straight to the Prime Minister's office.

"This is critical, we are going right to the top," explained Water Board Chair Sue McKortoff. "After all the decades of work done by the Okanagan Nation Alliance and partners to bring the salmon back, it would be a crime to see the salmon population collapse because we failed to protect our freshwater ecosystem from invasive zebra and quagga mussels when we still had a chance. This would ruin an important food source to local First Nations, as well as everything else that depends on the salmon, including birds, bears, orca."

The letter, sent today and cc'd to B.C.'s MPs, MLAs, Assembly of First Nations, chambers and more, calls for immediate, long-term federal funding assistance for the Province of B.C. to support invasive zebra and quagga mussel prevention efforts. "The Government of Canada should provide funds to at least match provincial government efforts across the West, or plan for significant higher management costs in the near future," the letter states.

In its letter to the federal government, the OBWB notes the Government of Canada's announcement in May 2023 of a Canada Water Agency which included a budget of \$750 mill. with \$420 mill. to address water concerns in the Great Lakes, but none for aquatic invasive species protection in the west.

"Has the federal government given up on us?" questioned OBWB Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears. "Have they accepted defeat before we've even had an infestation here? That's what it feels like.

"We appreciate there's a Canada Water Agency, but they're pouring money into remediation for the Great Lakes without protecting the still pristine waters in the west," she added. "The government has identified the Fraser River as a priority watershed. Regardless of what they do in the Okanagan, they should be true to their word and prioritize funds for the Fraser River. By protecting the Fraser, they will help protect the rest of the province."

The OBWB has been stepping up its calls for action after last September's announcement of quagga mussels in the Idaho's Snake River, a tributary to the Columbia River which connects to the Okanagan, and only an 11-hour drive to the B.C. and Alberta border. The closest infestation prior to this finding was in Manitoba. Idaho's desperate response was to spread more than 116,000 litres of toxic copper chelate into the river, killing almost seven tonnes of fish, and poisoning a 26 km stretch of the river. "Wholesale killing of fish, invertebrates, amphibians, and plants in the river was considered better than letting these mussels take hold" the board writes, adding the effectiveness won't be known until this spring.

In October, the OBWB began calling for a [temporary moratorium](#) on watercraft coming into B.C. until results from Idaho's efforts are known and the Province of B.C. has closed any gaps in its Invasive Mussel Defence Program. Support for the moratorium has been gathering steam with letters coming in from B.C. municipalities, chambers of commerce, the Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association, and others.

Between May and December 2023, B.C.'s Invasive Mussel Defence Program intercepted 155 watercraft on their way into B.C. that were identified as high-risk for the mussels; 79 were decontaminated; 36 were quarantined. Fourteen were confirmed to have invasive mussels. A recent B.C. government economic impact report states an invasive mussel infestation would cost the province \$64 to \$129 mill. annually. However, in reviewing the report, the OBWB has said the [costs would be higher](#) since the report leaves out harder-to-define costs, including impact to fisheries and quality of life.

For its part, the OBWB's Okanagan WaterWise outreach and education program has been running the "Don't Move A Mussel" campaign since 2013, raising awareness about the threat of the mussels and how to keep them out of the Okanagan. It also provides funding to the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society to conduct outreach to boaters and the public. The Water Board is also developing a mussel vulnerability guide for local governments, water purveyors, and other industrial users that rely on in-water infrastructure.

Please find the OBWB's letter to the federal government attached below.

For more information on zebra and quagga mussels, the risks to the Okanagan, and how to prevent their spread, please visit www.DontMoveAMussel.ca.

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MEDIA CONTACT: Corinne Jackson, OBWB – Communications Director
Office: 250-469-6271
Mobile: 250-718-7249
E-mail: Corinne.Jackson@obwb.ca

Right Honourable Justin Trudeau
Prime Minister of Canada
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A2
pm@pm.gc.ca

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Honourable Diane Lebouthillier
Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard
200 Kent St Station 15N100
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0E6
DFO.Minister-Ministre.MPO@dfo-mpo.gc.ca

Honourable Steven Guilbeault
Minister of Environment and Climate Change
Fontaine Building 12th Floor
200 Sacré-Coeur Blvd
Gatineau QC K1A 0H3
ministre-minister@ec.gc.ca

Honourable Dominic LeBlanc
Minister of Public Safety, Democratic Institutions and Intergovernmental Affairs
269 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P8
ps.ministerofpublicsafety-ministredelasecuritepublique.sp@ps-sp.gc.ca

Re: CALL FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION TO PREVENT INVASIVE MUSSEL INTRODUCTION TO B.C.

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau and Ministers,

It has come to our attention that federal funding to support B.C.'s Invasive Mussel Defence Program may be reduced or cancelled this year, and further, that other funding partners are citing a lack of federal leadership as justification to cancel or reduce their funding. This is just as the threat of invasive mussels has dramatically increased, with a confirmed infestation in the transboundary Columbia Basin. In addition to the actions we called for in [our letter](#), dated Oct. 18, 2023 and which included a temporary moratorium on boats coming into B.C., we are calling for immediate, long-term federal funding assistance for the Province of B.C. to support invasive zebra and quagga mussels prevention efforts. The Government of Canada should provide funds to at least match provincial government efforts across the West, or plan for significant higher management costs in the near future.

In September, Idaho announced that quagga mussels had been found in the state's Snake River, a tributary of the Columbia River, less than a day's drive to the border of B.C. and Alberta. Idaho's pre-planned rapid response was to spread more than 116,000 litres of toxic copper chelate into Snake River, killing almost

seven tonnes of fish, and poisoning a 26 km stretch of the river. Wholesale killing of fish, invertebrates, amphibians, and plants in the river was considered better than letting these mussels take hold. We won't know until this coming spring if the treatment has worked. Also in September, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) declared zebra mussels were discovered in New Brunswick. And then in November, Parks Canada declared zebra mussels had spread another 100km west to Clear Lake in Manitoba's Riding Mountain National Park.

DFO has a mandate to sustainably manage fisheries, work with Indigenous communities to enable their continued prosperity from fish, ensure aquatic ecosystems are protected from negative impacts, and protect the environment when emergencies arise. If invasive mussels arrive in B.C., they will severely impact Pacific salmon by depleting the food web in their spawning and rearing habitats in the Fraser and Columbia River systems. First Nations in B.C. have spent decades restoring these systems and their salmon populations, and an infestation will undermine the recovery of these fisheries. Knock-on effects will be seen in marine environments, where reductions in Pacific salmon populations will reduce a key food source for Orcas and other marine species. Protecting B.C.'s freshwaters from invasive mussels is squarely within the mandate of DFO.

The Canada Border Services Agency also has a responsibility to enforce the prohibition against importation of invasive mussels under the federal Aquatic Invasive Species Regulations. While we applaud the work of border service officers to intercept infested watercraft at many land crossings, CBSA is not fulfilling its responsibility for enforcement. Instead, it relies on provincial inspectors to follow up and decontaminate high-risk watercraft once they are identified.

The new Canada Water Agency has a mandate to improve freshwater management in Canada by providing leadership, effective federal collaboration, and improved coordination and collaboration with provinces, territories, and Indigenous Peoples to proactively address national and regional transboundary freshwater challenges and opportunities. Invasive mussels represent one of the biggest national and regional transboundary threats, yet none of the [\\$750 million](#) allocated to the Canada Water Agency addresses this threat. The Great Lakes region alone will receive more than \$420 million in funding over 10 years to deal with issues such as algae blooms which have been exacerbated by invasive mussels. It would take only \$4 million/year allocated to B.C. invasive mussel inspections to protect the Canadian Columbia Basin, the Fraser Basin, Peace Region, and other major western river systems. The Province of B.C. already allocates over \$1 million/year to this program, but without federal and other partner funding, these efforts will likely fail.

In addition to the threat to Pacific salmon, these mussels are known to stimulate toxic algae blooms, killing migratory birds and contaminating drinking water. They hurt local economies, requiring ongoing maintenance to remove them from in-water infrastructure such as bridges and docks, as well as water systems used to deliver water for agriculture, domestic, industrial, and commercial use. And of course, they degrade the quality of the shoreline environment for human enjoyment.

We view it as unacceptable and unjustifiable, given all the resources and responsibilities of the federal government and your departments, that no federal funding has been allocated to protect freshwater ecosystems from the extreme threat of invasive mussels in Western Canada. Protecting the west from these

mussels is of national importance, and it will take federal leadership to meet this inter-provincial and transboundary threat.

Understanding that protection of freshwater ecosystems and prevention of invasive species falls within federal mandates, regulations, and laws, we hope your departments will work together to find the resources to properly support western provinces in this important work. This is truly a case where a small investment now will prevent massive costs for years to come.

Yours truly,



Sue McKortoff, Chair
Okanagan Basin Water Board

CC:

- British Columbia MPs
- British Columbia MLAs
- British Columbia Assembly of First Nations
- Okanagan Nation Alliance, Chiefs Executive Council
- Okanagan First Nations Chiefs and Councils
- B.C. Local Government Chairs and Mayors
- Pacific NorthWest Economic Region: Matt Morrison, Chief Executive Officer
- Invasive Species Council of B.C.: Gail Wallin, Executive Director
- B.C. Chambers of Commerce
- Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association
- Union of BC Municipalities
- Shuswap Watershed Council
- Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society