



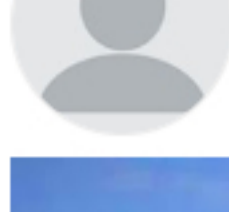
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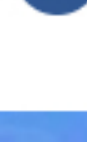
B.C. Wildlife Federation raises alarm over de-funding invasive mussel surveillance

Federal Government dedicates no funds to help surveillance of potentially deadly invasive species



Jim Bailey

Jan 30, 2024 11:30 AM



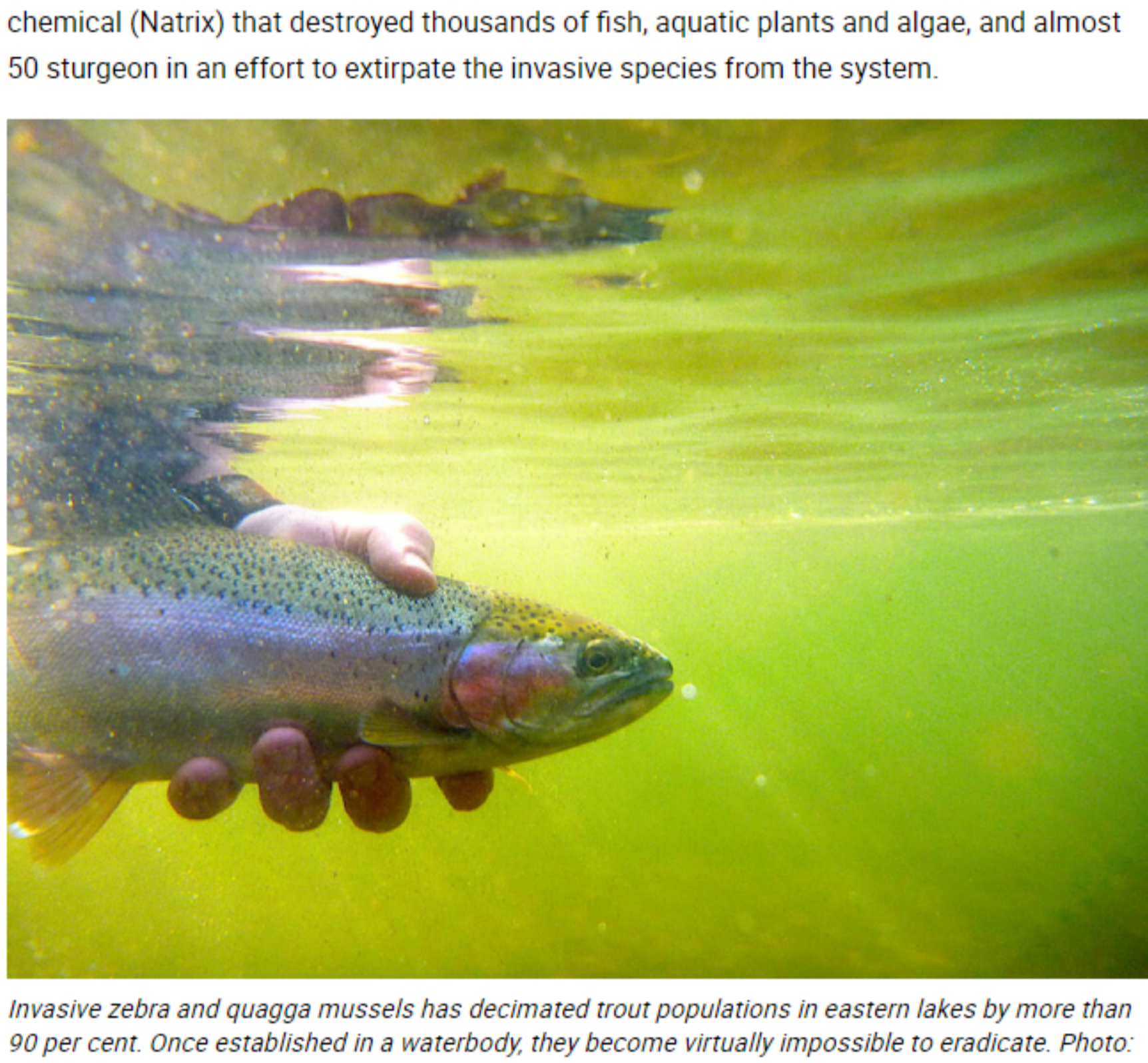
The presence of invasive mussels in the Columbia River would be devastating to wildlife, fish and plant populations in the main stem and its tributaries. Photo: Jim Bailey

De-funding surveillance programs that help keep invasive mussels out of British Columbia waters has been the cause of growing concern among wildlife management and environmental stewards.

The recent discovery of whirling disease (*myxobolus cerebralis*) in the headwaters of the Columbia River and lakes in Kootenay and Yoho National Parks has raised alarm, as have the presence of quagga mussels found in a 16-mile mid-section of the Snake River in Idaho, a tributary of the Columbia River.

"We have had dozens of close calls in B.C. in the past few years with mussel-infested boats crossing the border," said BC Wildlife Federation (BCWF) executive director Jesse Zeman. "These mussels are the biggest threat known to our freshwater ecosystems; an infestation would be disastrous."

Quagga mussel larvae were found in the Snake River in September, and the Idaho government spent over \$3M treating a 16 mile section of the river with a copper-based chemical (Natrix) that destroyed thousands of fish, aquatic plants and algae, and almost 50 sturgeon in an effort to extirpate the invasive species from the system.



Invasive zebra and quagga mussels has decimated trout populations in eastern lakes by more than 90 per cent. Once established in a waterbody, they become virtually impossible to eradicate. Photo: Jim Bailey

The federal government's Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), FortisBC and BC Hydro are scaling back their support for invasive mussel surveillance in B.C. and failing in their duty to protect our fish, said Zeman.

"We need the federal government to step up now with increased surveillance before the effects become catastrophic," said Zeman. "Every entry point in B.C. needs a mandatory 24-hour boat inspection station to stop these species from spreading north from the United States and west from Alberta."

DFO has reduced its support for mussel surveillance from \$475,000 in 2022 to zero in 2023. BC Hydro's support for the program has dropped from \$1.25 million to just \$350,000. Support from FortisBC went from \$250,000 in 2020 to a contribution of \$50,000 made in December, 2023.

Provincially, the B.C. Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship (the Ministry), along with the Conservation Officers Service (COS) and community partners are responsible for the Invasive Mussels Defence Program. The Ministry has increased or maintained its funding over the years, yet, is concerned with the recent cuts made by the federal government.

"In response to a reduction in financial contributions from Fisheries and Oceans Canada, BC Hydro, and Fortis BC, the Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship has initiated funding conversations with the federal government and other high-profile stakeholders to support the Invasive Mussel Defence Program core operations in 2024," the Ministry told the Times.

BC Hydro explained that the \$1.25-M contribution was a five-year investment to kickstart the Invasive Mussels Defence Program which started in 2015.

"As you know, invasive mussels pose a significant risk not only to BC's rivers and lakes, but also to our operations at BC Hydro," said Susan Edgell, BC Hydro stakeholder advisor. "If an infestation were to occur, they could interfere with our ability to produce power by plugging pipes and other equipment in our generating facilities.

"That's why we have been operating an internal program for the past decade to study the risks to our facilities, monitor the presence of invasive mussel larvae, and further promote the education of staff and contractors on the risks that these invasive species pose to the ecosystems in which we operate."

BC Hydro expected other funding partners to step forward so that the expenses would be shared more equitably, but that apparently did not materialize.

"That said, we recognize that the province's important program is in need of more funding," said Edgell. "As such, we are currently working with the province to help ensure our approaches are aligned and expect to have more information to share in the coming weeks."

The Central Kootenay Invasive Species Society (CKISS) is on the frontline monitoring and remediating invasive species in the Kootenays, and will continue fully funded by the province this year.

In 2023, CKISS tested 10 South Kootenay water bodies including Upper and Lower Arrow, Kootenay, Duncan, Slocan, Summit, and Whatshan Lakes, as well as the Columbia, Kootenay, and Slocan Rivers (upper and lower). The samples were analyzed at a B.C. Government lab and all tested negative for the presence of zebra and quagga mussels.

"It is our understanding that regardless of DFO (federal), BC Hydro, and Fortis contributions, the program is continuing as normal this year," confirmed CKISS executive director Erin Bates. "We were recently part of a provincial aquatic invasive species call that was led by the provincial staff who run the program, and it sounds like everything will be normal."

The Ministry encourages all watercraft launching in B.C. waters to "Clean, Drain, and Dry" after use to help prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species. Everyone travelling with watercraft including boats, kayaks, canoes, and paddle boards must stop at inspection stations between April and October.

"We will continue to monitor threats to aquatic invasive species, as we collaborate with jurisdictions across western Canada and the USA to ensure B.C.'s prevention and response efforts are coordinated as part of a perimeter defence approach," said the Ministry, offering information on the inspection numbers for 2023.

- For the 2023 season, 43 inspectors operated six inspection stations and two roving inspection crews.
- The watercraft inspection stations were located at key border crossings along the Alberta and U.S. borders.
- Crews completed 20,900 inspections and interacted with about 39,200 people to promote Clean, Drain, Dry practices—155 watercraft were identified as high risk, 66 decontamination orders were issued, and 36 watercraft were given quarantine periods to meet the required drying time.

The B.C. Wildlife Federation is hosting a free information session at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 30 on the threat posed by invasive zebra and quagga mussels, following the de-funding of surveillance programs designed to protect B.C. waters.

James Little, deputy administrator of the Okanagan Basin Water Board, will lead the online webinar, and an overview of the threat posed by these invasive species followed by a Q&A session.

Registration is open for the presentation "Threatened Waters: What invasive zebra and quagga mussels mean for B.C."

Go to [Conservation Webinar Series | B.C. Wildlife Federation](https://bcwf.bc.ca) (bcwf.bc.ca) for details.