



Water board wants senior governments to get serious about zebra mussel threat in Okanagan

By [staff1](#) on February 12, 2014

The Okanagan Basin Water Board is doing what it can to raise awareness and stop an infestation of invasive zebra and quagga mussels from reaching the Okanagan, in part through its Don't Move a Mussel campaign (www.DontMoveAMussel.ca).

But it is now calling on the province and federal government to step up efforts and fast.

"If the mussels get into Okanagan waters they have potential to do significant damage to our beaches, fish, people's boats, tourism, and municipal water systems," warned Doug Findlater, OBWB's Board Chair and Mayor of West Kelowna.

"All levels of government need to work together to take action. It looks to me like provincial and federal officials are interested, but a comprehensive strategy is needed and we're running out of time. Every year that goes by is another year our lakes could get infected."

The OBWB's Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears agreed, adding, "It only takes one boat infested with the mussels, launching in our waters, to cause serious harm to our lakes."

With spring – and boating season – around the corner, the water board is concerned, knowing large numbers of boats from outside the valley will be heading for our waters, from other parts of Canada and the U.S.

"We are extremely eager to address this issue, but we can't truly protect the Okanagan without the right laws in place and participation from other levels of government," added Warwick Sears.

The board has been pushing for a stronger provincial and federal response to the threat of the invasive mussels since 2011.

The issue was raised again at this week's monthly board meeting. Research conducted for the OBWB notes the arrival of the mussels, originally from Europe, could cost the Okanagan more than \$43 million a year to just manage.

They are known to create toxic algae blooms, ruin beaches with sharp shells, destroy boat motors, foul water intakes and outfalls, put the ecology of the water at risk – including its fishery, and more. And, there is no proven method to eradicate the mussels once they arrive.

Of concern to the Water Board is a recent report from Idaho and its watercraft inspection program which found 19 per cent of the infected boats it stopped in the last five years were on their way to B.C. and Alberta.

While the OBWB is thankful for the inspection efforts of Idaho and other western states, there is currently nothing in place for inspections at the Canada-U.S. border, or interprovincial borders (e.g. B.C.-Alberta).

Currently, the mussels are in the Great Lakes of Quebec and Ontario, and they were discovered in Manitoba in October. Okanagan waters are considered some of the most at risk in B.C.

“The federal government needs to pass the legislation that has been pending for several months now, making it possible for Canada Border Services Agency staff to stop boats from entering into Canada from the U.S. unless they’ve been inspected,” added Warwick Sears. “As for B.C., it now has fines and jail time for importing the mussels, but no inspection stations to follow-up.

“The province has said each inspection station would cost \$60,000 to \$160,000 per year, but all of B.C. could be protected by siting these stations at a few major points of entry.

The Idaho inspection program is entirely self-funded through a boat sticker program. British Columbia could do the same.

And, given the multi-million dollar cost of an invasion, our board would like to see senior government move forward with a similar program,” said Warwick Sears.

“Prevention is going to cost a lot less than dealing with it once it’s here.”

Directors asked staff to meet with the Okanagan MLA and MP caucus with recommendations; to send new letters to the province and federal government, urging ministers responsible to pass the pending federal legislation, as well as ensure appropriate funding is in place to do an effective job.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) was established in 1970 as a collaboration of the three Okanagan regional districts – North, Central and Okanagan-Similkameen.

The board provides leadership for sustainable water management by protecting and enhancing the quality of life and environment in the Okanagan Basin, from Armstrong to Osoyoos.

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