

Invasive quagga mussels stopped at border by alert CBSA officer

By [staff1](#) on March 27, 2014



Quagga mussel. (Courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey)

A potential infestation of the Okanagan lakes with quagga mussels was averted recently thanks to an alert customs officer at the Osoyoos border crossing.

The officer found mussels encrusted on a large pleasure-craft boat crossing into Canada the evening of March 12 and alerted the provincial Conservation Officer Service.

Conservation officers were able to bring in a decontamination unit the following day to decontaminate the boat.

Osoyoos Mayor Stu Wells said there were several heroes in the incident including the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) official who stopped the boat, but also the boat transporter, who was co-operative.

“That was the right officer,” said Wells. “I’m really happy. There’s obviously people from CBSA that are interested in what happened ... I certainly commend that individual for stepping forward.”

Barb Leslie, regional inspector in charge of the Conservation Officer Service for the Okanagan region, confirms the mussels were subsequently found to be dead and were, in fact, quagga mussels.

She cautions, however, there are many areas on boats where larvae could still be living, so there is still a concern even if mussels appear to be dead.

“In a boat there are so many areas that retain water after a boat is taken out of the water,” Leslie said. “They can actually live a long time and get reactivated once they go into freshwater again, so we have to be on the side of caution on it as we did in this case.”

The boat, she said, originated in Texas, but she didn’t have information on whether it was launched in any lakes on route to Canada.

Some lakes in the Southwest U.S. are now infested with invasive mussels.

The boat was being taken to the Kelowna area to launch in Okanagan Lake.

CBSA has no authority under federal law to refuse entry to infected boats, but was able to hold the boat in this case because the commercial transporter was co-operative.

Proposed regulations under the federal Fisheries Act that would prohibit the importation of invasive species are mired in the bureaucracy of the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO).

Stakeholder consultations on the new regulations concluded in April 2013.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) has been urging the federal government to move forward with the regulations, pointing out that they will allow CBSA officers at the border to stop and inspect watercraft and prohibit the entry of contaminated vessels.

Anna Warwick Sears, executive director of the OBWB, said she has been in touch with local Conservative Members of Parliament Dan Albus and Ron Cannan, but neither has been able to provide a timeline for when the regulations will be adopted.

“It’s frustrating,” said Warwick Sears. “I don’t know if anybody is to blame or not, but I wish that things could happen faster.”

The cost of an infestation by zebra or quagga mussels to the Okanagan is estimated at about \$40 million a year just to manage. There is no way to eradicate the mussels once they get into the lakes, and they destroy infrastructure and beaches by encrusting objects in the water with their sharp shells. They also damage water quality.

The B.C. government has enacted legislation that makes it illegal to transport live or dead mussels in the province, however the province has not yet committed funds toward inspection stations like those on highways in U.S. states such as Idaho.

There are three conservation field officers based in Penticton and a supervisor who enforce provincial laws against transporting and launching contaminated boats.

These officers have authority to stop, search and seize vessels as well as to order further cleaning and decontamination of boats suspected of having invasive mussels, Leslie said.

“We need to coordinate between several levels of government,” said Warwick Sears.

“We need a local decontamination station. We need to have those laws in place. We’re going to need more conservation officers that are trained and ready to go on this and we’re going to need more on-ground outreach.”

Zebra and quagga mussels were originally brought to North America from Eastern Europe through ship ballast, and they have been spread throughout much of North America by pleasure craft being transported between lakes.

Major waterways throughout the east of North America have been infested and in recent years the mussels have made inroads into lakes in the Southwestern United States.

In Canada, the mussels have now spread as far west as Manitoba.

The OBWB has information about the mussels and how to decontaminate boats on its website at www.DontMoveAMussel.ca.

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