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BC begins mussel inspections

by Ragnar Haagen | Story: 122241 - Sep 5, 2014 / 8:00 am

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A quagga mussel infestation could cost the province millions of dollars per year.

The provincial government recently announced they have stepped up inspection enforcement of boats possibly containing either zebra or quagga mussels.

Authorities implemented a pilot inspection station earlier this month where they examined 132 boats and found no evidence of the invasive species. They also stopped and inspected 11 watercraft in Victoria and found nothing there either. These competition sailboats had traveled from mussel-infested Lake Ontario and were inspected at the Victoria Yacht Club.

While this type of proactive approach is a welcome change for those at the Okanagan Water Basin Board, executive director Anne Warwick Sears still believes more needs to be done.

"The fact that they did one hundred and thirty-two is great, but it's a tiny drop in the bucket compared with the scale of the problem and how much more seriously the other jurisdictions are taking it."

As a comparison she points to Idaho, which conducted nearly 200,000 stops between 2009-2013 as part of that state's ambitious and proactive watercraft inspection program.

Those stops only intercepted 105 vessels transporting mussels, but roughly 20 per cent of them were headed to Canada at the time.

Adult mussels can survive up to 30 days out of the water, and its larvae – which are microscopic and free floating – can survive even longer in live wells, bilge water, or ballast water.

Warwick Sears also took issue with the provinces estimated cost of \$28 million per year, if an invasive mussels infestation ever took over the aquatic ecosystems, salmon populations, hydro power stations or other infrastructure facilities.

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She feels the actual cost could be substantially higher, and says the board has previously estimated the cost to be around \$43 million per year.

"It grossly underestimates the type of impact," she says.

"It's really expensive to work in the water infrastructure. The estimates the province came up with didn't look at the personal water intakes that people have on the lake – there are over 900 licensed water intakes on Okanagan Lake. The tourism impacts weren't taken into account. There's just a huge amount of things that weren't taken into account."

The Alberta government has also recognized the seriousness of the issue and has completed approximately 2,500 inspections since June 9.

According to a [recent release](#), two boats were found to have zebra mussels attached and 99 others were deemed to be "high risk", meaning they were coming from either the United States or other provinces that are either infested with mussels or do not currently have inspection and monitoring programs.

"Alberta is being very proactive in taking steps to stop invasive mussels from entering our lakes," says Robin Campbell, Minister of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development.

"Our success really depends on boaters taking advantage of inspection sites and always cleaning, draining and drying their boats. With only about half of boaters stopping to have their watercraft inspected this summer, stricter measures may be necessary to protect our waterways."

Alberta estimates an annual cost of \$75 million for an infestation of zebra or quagga mussels.

Alberta recently established a pilot project with Montana to use "sniffer" dogs to detect mussels at inspection sites. It was the first of its kind in Canada and may become a permanent addition to the inspection program.

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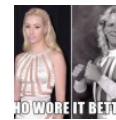
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