



NEWS LOCAL

Toxic mussels caught at the border

By Tereza Verenca
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Zebra mussels pollute drinking water. (QMI AGENCY)

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Inspections for invasive species must be tightened, says the owner of a commercial hauling company that unwittingly brought into Canada mussels that pollute drinking water with toxic algae.

According to documents published after a Freedom of Information request by Pentiction Western News, Randy Vik, of Cardinal Boat Movers in North Vancouver was transferring a 44-foot powerboat from Lake Pleasant, Arizona to Kelowna on March 12.

A Canada Border Services Agency guard at the Osoyoos crossing noticed what appeared to be a quagga or zebra mussel shell attached to the hull, missed by an inspection crew in Idaho.

Under the B.C. Wildlife Act, it's illegal to bring this species – dead or alive – into the province. The Ministry of Environment was immediately contacted and the boat was parked overnight.

Even though Vik agreed to decontaminate the vessel at a safe location for \$320, CBSA did not have the authority to deny entry into Canada if he wasn't compliant said a ministry document. But Vik argues the threat of zebra mussels entering B.C.'s fresh waterways is inevitable if CBSA doesn't tighten its belt.

"I can't tell you how many times I've driven alongside boats being brought up from Lake Tahoe, that still have their American registry number, and I see them hop right into B.C. waters," he said. "If you don't catch them at the border, they'll get right through."

The mussel, known for its light and dark alternating stripes, are also known to disrupt ecosystems and damage pipes in water treatment plants. A 2013 study commissioned by the province, estimated the cost of an invasive mussel infestation in B.C. could cost more than \$28 million a year.

The B.C. government is drafting a document known as the Dreissenid Mussels Early Detection and Rapid Response Plan – the ABCs of the invasive species and its harmful effects. In the interim, the Environment Ministry's Matthias Herborg is teaching CBSA guards what to look for should a boat pass through the border.

"They can still give us a call if they see something of concern," he said.

Herborg told 24 Hours federal legislation giving CBSA the right to enforce provincial law could surface as early as spring. The fine for violating the Wildlife Act is upwards of \$250,000.