

MANY RESIDENTS ON SOLANA BAY ARE UPSET WITH THE INCREASING AMOUNT OF DEEP, DIRTY SLUDGE

Posted on 22 August 2012 by Mathew White



Doug Irwin, who has been living on the shores of Solana Bay for the past 13 years, uses a make-shift homemade tool to scoop pounds of milfoil and other sludge from the water surrounding his dock on Friday, Aug. 17. The increasing amount of milfoil and other sludge has been a nightmare for residents on Solana Bay this year, with boats being unable to dock properly and swimmers facing a real safety issue with the sticky mess. Photo by Mathew White.

Anyone who knows anything about Osoyoos will tell you Osoyoos Lake is the lifeline of this town. But imagine waking up on a beautiful South Okanagan day, stepping out onto your deck and being greeted, not

by a pristine and clear lake, but by a rancid smell and more than 10 feet of deep, dirty sludge.

That's what the residents sitting on Solana Bay have been dealing with this summer as the bay's water level sits dangerously low as increasing amounts of milfoil and other gunk (bird feces, leaves, etc.) continue to pile up on the lake's floor.

"This has been the worst year," said Doug Irwin, who has been a resident and homeowner on Solana Bay in Osoyoos for the past 13 years. "It's always been bad, but this has been the first year that we've really become upset because they dropped the lake so low that you can really see what's going on."

Standing on his deck this past Friday morning, Irwin uses a large, home-made tool to scoop the milfoil and other sludge floating around his dock. In just one scoop he is easily able to pull out about five pounds of the muck. With Osoyoos Lake sitting around 911.33 feet this past Friday, Irwin said they only have about 18 inches of water in the bay.

He said since the initial clearing of the milfoil was done by the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) in early July, the high temperatures and low lake level has resulted in a complete mess.

"They came in at the first part of July, when the lake was up higher, and just did a haircut of the milfoil," said Irwin. "And about a week after that, what happened is the lake dropped and the milfoil that's all sitting at the bottom photosynthesized and bloomed."

"So they're throwing money at it, but they're not addressing the root problem, which is, you got to get more depth to this bay."

Besides the smell and unsightliness of the bay, there are a number of more serious issues going on because of the sludge, said Irwin. A huge problem residents are having is not being able to properly dock their boats or watercraft.

"Bonnie, next door, she's the one who can't get her boat into the lake ... so they might have to leave it there," he said. "And Ron just bought a new seadoo for his grandkid and he's pulled it out because he's sucking weeds and mud and everything into the propeller."

Randy North, president of the Paradise Park Association (who runs the Paradise Park RV Resort on Solana Bay) said he too is frustrated with the above-average amount of sludge this year.

"There's no flow in the bay so there's quite a bit of gunk in the bottom," he said. "The sludge collects, and of course nobody wants to go in it because it doesn't feel very good on the feet."

The lack of swimming caused by this sludge and the fact that many boats are unable to dock properly, raises the amount of mooring in the bay, said North.

He fully agrees with Irwin that something needs to be done, but he's not sure exactly what.

Finally, and perhaps the most important issue, Irwin said there is also a significant safety problem with the bay and if something isn't done soon, he fears for the worst.

"My concern is, we were out and my wife thought, 'how bad can it be down there?' And she jumped over and she went into the sludge. As she tried to get out, she kept going down. It was like quicksand," said Irwin.

Fortunately, Irwin was nearby and able to pull his wife out before something more serious happened, but he fears what might have happened had he not been in the vicinity.

"If you have kids out here, on their floats, they look over and think that's not deep, so they jump over, and if they don't have a lifejacket, it's going to drown some kid," he said. "You just sink right in. You can't stand on it."

Irwin said he has a number of possible solutions to this problem, but the one he supports the most is simply having a dredge come in and pump the mess onto a vacant town property on the east side of the bay.

Because milfoil is such a fantastic fertilizer, Irwin said he's hoping something can be worked out with the area farmers to utilize this sludge, while at the same time, making things safer and cleaner for everyone.

After that, he said it would be best to install a pipe in the bay which shoots water back into the lake, thus

allowing for water flow and circulation, which in turn would stop the sludge from building up.

“Because right now it comes in but it can’t go anywhere,” he said.

Again, North said he wasn’t sure what the best solution would be, but whatever happens, he would like to see it be the most environmentally-friendly solution possible, especially with the amount of fish and other wildlife present in the bay.

Despite the bay falling under provincial jurisdiction, Irwin said he has already spoken with Osoyoos Mayor Stu Wells about this issue and said he will be making a formal presentation to town council at their next meeting in September.

And while he understands it is not the town’s responsibility per se, he does feel that the town should stand behind its residents and support them in any way possible, something he said Mayor Wells is fully on board with.

“I think everything they’re talking about is absolutely right on the money,” said Wells. “The milfoil situation in there is not good, and of course when the milfoil dies, it’s further compacting the gunk. Having said that, I think the town’s only role would be for them to come before council and I think town council would take a supportive role in helping them on their journey, because it’s quite a long journey.”

Wells reiterated this is not a town issue and therefore no town dollars would be spent towards the problem. But he would like to see the town take a supportive role in helping the residents find the best solution possible.

In the meantime, while he waits for his chance to address council, Irwin said he has taken it upon himself to start a homeowners association, giving the residents around Solana Bay a collective legal voice, something he said he’s received tremendous support of so far.

He also sent a sample of the sludge to an independent lab in Kelowna to have analysed for possible health issues.