

Invasive mussels back in Okanagan group's cross-hairs



By Penticton Western News

Published: **February 13, 2014 03:00 PM**

Updated: **February 13, 2014 03:173 PM**

B.C. should take a page out of Idaho's playbook if it wants to block the spread of invasive mussels into the Okanagan lake system, according to the agency tasked with protecting local waters.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board has also renewed calls for the federal government to draw up new regulations that would make it illegal to transport invasive species, such as thumbnail-sized zebra and quagga mussels, across the Canada-U.S. border.

"They're on their way, and the more protection we have the better," said OBWB executive director Anna Warwick Sears.

Idaho's state government in 2009 began charging boaters \$10 a year to fund inspection stations at which vessels are checked for invasive mussels that foul in-lake equipment, such as water intakes, and destroy ecosystems.

An OBWB-funded study estimated mussel-related damage could cost \$40 million to repair in the first few years of colonization in the Okanagan. The mussels, which entered North America in the 1980s, have been detected as far west in Canada as Lake Winnipeg, but have reached California in the U.S.

Idaho reported that in its program's first five years, inspectors looked at nearly 200,000 boats, 105 of which were carrying invasive mussels.

Nineteen percent of those contaminated vessels were headed to B.C. or Alberta.

Warwick Sears said the Idaho program proves there's a threat to waters here, but also illustrates a way to combat the risk.

"This is how things should be done. (Idaho) is a government that's taking things really seriously and I would like to get to the level they are at as soon as possible," she said.

The OBWB has recommended the federal and provincial governments set up a handful of inspection stations on the B.C.-Alberta and Canada-U.S. borders.

Warwick Sears said Canada Border Services Agency officers could be trained to identify high-risk boats entering the country and then pass off the files to B.C. conservation officers, who could also handle the interprovincial crossings.

But empowering CBSA officers to detain suspected mussel-bearing boats requires new federal regulations, she continued, and therein lies the problem.

Consultation on the new regulations is still open, according to Fisheries and Oceans Canada, which offered no timeline for completion of that process.

Okanagan-Coquihalla MP Dan Albas said he shares the OBWB's concerns about invasive mussels and supports co-operation between the federal and provincial governments.

"Obviously it's important for us to intercept these kinds of boats on land and not on the water," he said.

Albas believes, however, that governments must fully explore the possibility of adding other entities, like commercial vehicle inspectors, into the mix.

"Existing enforcement infrastructure with potentially enhanced fines for towing these vehicles may be one answer," he said.

B.C. Environment Ministry spokesman Dave Crebo said in a statement the province conducted a limited check-station program last summer and is now "considering a more comprehensive roadside inspection station project to stop boats and inspect them for mussels."

He noted the ministry works closely with partners in the U.S. and other western provinces to intercept contaminated boats headed to B.C. and that no viable invasive mussels have yet been detected here.

The warning system failed in 2012, however, when a boat infested with dead mussels launched in Shuswap Lake, despite warnings from officials south of the border.

Find this article at:

<http://www.pentictonwesternnews.com/news/245450581.html>