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Okanagan residents warned about invasive mussel species

By Lake Country Calendar

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Okanagan residents are being rallied to fight invaders.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board decided Tuesday to consider ways of allowing residents to express concerns about the risk of zebra and quagga mussels to federal and provincial officials.

"Our MLAs need countless correspondence from constituents," said director Toby Pike at a meeting in Coldstream.

"This is a nerve issue for people in the valley. They really don't want this to happen."

The mussels are indigenous to Europe and since arriving in North America, they have spread across the continent, clogging water intake pipes and boat motors. They also deplete food sources for fish, produce toxins that contaminate drinking water and razor-sharp shells spread across beaches.

Also on Tuesday, the OBWB board agreed to write a letter once again reiterating the need for the federal and provincial governments to take action on the mussels, particularly given that a boat infested with mussels was found at the Osoyoos border crossing March 12.

"I'm quite disgusted with how the province and the feds are taking this so lightly," said director Allan Patton.

OBWB has been urging the federal government to permit border guards to inspect boats and prohibit entry of any contaminated vessels. It also wants the provincial government to create an inspection program.

"We have to continue to hammer away at the province to do something and the feds to implement regulations," said Doug Findlater, OBWB chairperson.

When contacted, Okanagan MPs have indicated that federal regulations are pending.

"They're very vague on that end of things," said Anna Warwick Sears, OBWB executive director.

The other concern is that when the mussel-infested boat was stop in Osoyoos, the B.C. Ministry of Environment had to find a commercial company for decontamination.

"They're just not prepared," said Warwick Sears of the ministry.

"There are very few resources coming down to the local level."

Director Juliette Cunningham says senior officials need to act as the possibility grows that mussels will arrive in the Okanagan.

"I have people coming up to me and they're freaking out about it," she said.

Okanagan jurisdictions are also being urged to speak out.

"We need to get every municipality to do it (write letters). That may have some teeth," said director Gerry Zimmermann.

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