

OSOYOOS TIMES

Many citizens angry as milfoil out of control on Osoyoos Lake

By [staff1](#) on August 6, 2014



Dave Caswell of the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) harvests milfoil off Haynes Point in this file photo. An agreement reached a year ago places a moratorium on milfoil harvesting between April and July 1, but this has resulted in milfoil growth getting out of hand this year. (Richard McGuire file photo)

Many Osoyoos residents are upset and complaining about the abnormally high levels of milfoil growth in Osoyoos Lake this summer, but there's nothing the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB), which runs the milfoil control program, can do about it after the provincial and federal government halted milfoil harvesting to protect fish habitat.

Rules put in place by the provincial and federal governments to protect smallmouth bass spawning areas have meant the annual spring milfoil cutting program on Osoyoos Lake was suspended until early July, instead of the usual starting date of early April, said James Littlely, office and project manager for the OBWB, which is responsible for milfoil control in Osoyoos Lake and other waterbodies across the Okanagan Valley.

The lack of spring harvesting of milfoil in Osoyoos Lake has resulted in one of the worst concentrations of milfoil in the lake's history, said Littlely.

"We were not allowed to start our milfoil control program anywhere on Osoyoos Lake until July 1 ... when we usually begin in early April," said Littlely, who acknowledges his office has been swamped with complaints from Osoyoos residents over the past several weeks about the unusually high levels of milfoil.

The introduction of the Rocky Mountain Ridge mussel to a small section of the northwest part of Osoyoos Lake has also resulted in milfoil control being banned on this section of the lake, said Littlely.

The federal government, with support from the provincial Ministry of Environment, decided last year to ban all milfoil control on Osoyoos Lake until July 1 in order to protect spawning habitat for smallmouth bass, said Littley.

“Traditionally, after April 1, we used to have our guys out there as we would start our rototilling program,” he said.

Using a large rototilling machine kills milfoil at its roots, said Littley.

The program is most effective in early April as there isn’t any traffic on the lake and huge amounts of milfoil are cut off at the roots and rise to the surface of the lake, where it is gathered and harvested, he said.

Environmental professionals were hired by the provincial government with a mandate to protect smallmouth bass spawning and nesting areas and a decision was made to halt the milfoil control problem until July 1, he said.

“Right now it’s a blanket restriction and we were told we couldn’t begin our (milfoil control) program until July 1,” he said. “That has obviously affected the amount of milfoil we could cut ... and that’s why we’ve received so many complaints about the high milfoil growth this year.”

Milfoil growth has been so rapid this summer on the north side of Osoyoos Lake that the harvesting machine has been unable to get to that side of the lake as it won’t fit under the bridge that separates the north and south side, said Littley.

Special crews were in Osoyoos on Tuesday to take apart the harvesting machine, transport it to a docking area and re-assembled it so milfoil cutting and harvesting can begin on the north side this week, he said.

If the government is committed to protecting fish habitat and running a successful milfoil control program, there is only one solution, said Littley.

Other lakes in the South Okanagan, such as Okanagan Lake and Shuswap Lake, have initiated a mapping program that indicate fish spawning areas and which time of the year those areas shouldn’t be disturbed, he said.

Osoyoos Lake is going to need a similar program as it’s easy to protect fish spawning areas and conduct milfoil control at the same time, he said.

Public beaches are given top priority when it comes to milfoil control, while areas of high growth in front of residential homes are given lowest priority, which upsets many property owners, said Littley.

“When private property owners call and complain and say they pay high taxes for milfoil control, that’s not the reality,” he said. “Private property owners pay 83 cents per \$100,000 for this service. That means if you own a \$1 million property, you are paying \$8.30 for milfoil control.”

Osoyoos residents are actually blessed when it comes to milfoil control as there are only two harvesting machines in the entire Okanagan Valley and one is dedicated full-time to Osoyoos Lake, he said.

“We have two machines for five lakes and Osoyoos Lake gets one machine full-time,” he said. “Okanagan Lake, Skaha Lake, Kalamalka Lake and Wood Lake share the other machine.”

The OBWB is going to push the senior levels of government to allow for milfoil harvesting to resume each spring in early April or the milfoil problem in Osoyoos Lake is going to get much worse, said Littlely.

‘It’s really a question of the provincial and federal government committing the resources and funding,” he said. “An environmental expert is going to need to be hired to do the mapping ... so we can continue to harvest in the spring.”

The Okanagan Valley is the only place in Canada where the Rocky Mountain Ridge mussel has been found and they have surfaced in the northwest portion of Osoyoos Lake.

“We are not allowed to rototill in that section of the lake and we are going to continue to have milfoil problems in that area,” he said.

The milfoil problem is equally as bad on the U.S. portion of Osoyoos Lake and Washington State officials have made requests to the OBWB to use its harvesting machine, but those requests were denied because of the many problems faced on the Canadian side, said Littlely.

Osoyoos Mayor Stu Wells said he has received numerous complaints about milfoil growth on Osoyoos Lake this spring and summer.

As the former chair of the OBWB and a member of the Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen, he has brought these concerns forward and hopes a permanent solution can be found, said Wells.

If other lakes can run milfoil control programs, while protecting fish habitat, it can be done here in Osoyoos Lake, said Wells.

“I’m very hopeful the province and federal government can build something that works for everyone,” he said. “We need milfoil control on this lake and we need to protect our fish habitat and I remain confident we can come up with something that has a pleasant result for everyone.”

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