

Washington cabin owners want poison used in Osoyoos Lake to beat milfoil

BY JENNIFER SALTMAN, THE PROVINCE JULY 20, 2011



Monique Stone operates a harvester on a Vernon lake. The Okanagan Valley uses the harvester to trim top of the invasive plant Eurasian water milfoil during the summer months. On the south part of the lake, Washington cabin owners want to use poison to beat the weed.

Photograph by: Okanagan Basin Water Board, For PNG

A Washington county's proposed plans for dealing with an underwater pest have concerned the protectors of the Okanagan Valley's water supply.

The Okanagan County Weed Control Board has applied to use an aquatic herbicide called Triclopyr to deal with the infestation of Eurasian water milfoil at the south end of Osoyoos Lake.

However, the chemical is not approved for aquatic use in Canada and the Okanagan Basin Water Board is worried about what will happen on the Canadian side of the lake.

“We’re just saying that we don’t think they should be using that method in a shared area,” said board chairman and Osoyoos Mayor Stu Wells.

The Americans don’t currently have a method to deal with water milfoil and cottage owners have asked the county to get rid of the weed, which keeps them from using their beaches. The treatment would cost about \$1,000 per year — the most affordable option — but would not be a permanent solution.

Wells said the Okanagan’s chemical-free method works just as well.

During the fall and winter, rototillers are used in shallow areas to remove the roots of the plant from the bottom sediments of the lake. In the summer, milfoil is cut to two metres below the surface using harvesters.

Wells said Okanagan lakes are vital for drinking water, agriculture and tourism, and he’s concerned about the effects of Triclopyr.

“The Okanagan Valley is the most challenged water system in Canada,” Wells said, describing a large demand and a low recharge rate. “Osoyoos Lake is our lifeblood here.”

The B.C. Ministry of Environment has sent a letter asking the Weed Control Board to investigate other options and conduct full consultation on both sides of the border.

The OBWB sent a letter asking that the herbicide not be used and states that the potential risks may violate the Boundary Waters Treaty.

The Americans are exploring options and have inquired about borrowing machinery from the Okanagan to harvest and rototill their milfoil. They’re also looking into getting weevils that will eat the weed.

A spokesperson for the Okanagan County Noxious Weed Control Board claimed there were five milfoil-related drowning deaths in Washington state last year and the first concern is safety.

They say any negative impact to native plants from the herbicide has been short-term and if a subsurface injection is used drift outside the treatment area is unlikely.

Okanagan County has not yet received approval from the Washington State Ecology Department. If the application is allowed, the plan is to spread the herbicide over an area of about four hectares.

Anna Lyon, manager of the Noxious Weed Control Board, could not be reached for comment because she was out in the field.

The invasive plant was introduced to North America in the late 19th century and the Okanagan has been battling it since the 1970s. Milfoil forms thick stands under water and dense mats on the surface that can interfere with water-based activities. It elbows out native plants and dense growth may impact fish and wildlife.

"We're not putting up dukes or anything over this, but it is our job as the Okanagan Basin Water Board to be a bit of watchdog out there," Wells said.

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Statement from Sandy Howard, spokeswoman for the Washington State Department of Ecology:

"We understand British Columbia's concerns about the use of herbicides in Lake Osoyoos. Washington state has not approved Okanogan Noxious Weed Control Board's application to use herbicides to treat milfoil in Lake Osoyoos. The Board has received funding to develop a plan to evaluate all options for plant control, including herbicides and mechanical means. This plan is not yet completed. We look forward to seeing a completed plan for lake vegetation while we work with the BC Ministry to develop acceptable options to manage milfoil in the lake. We value our relationship with British Columbia and want to take make decisions that work for best for all parties."

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