

The Epoch Times

US Herbicide Plan for Osoyoos Lake Prompts Concern

Aquatic herbicide could end up in Canadian portion of lake where it isn't approved, say water officials

By Joan Delaney

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Monique Stone operates a milfoil harvester on a lake in Vernon, B.C. The harvester is used in the Okanagan Valley to trim the top part of Eurasian watermilfoil in summer. A Washington state-based organization has applied to use a chemical herbicide to kill milfoil in the U.S. portion of Osoyoos Lake. (Courtesy of Okanagan Basin Water Board)

A plan by a Washington state-based organization to use a chemical herbicide to kill a tenacious weed in the U.S. portion of Osoyoos Lake has raised concerns in B.C.'s Okanagan Valley.

The Okanagan County Noxious Weed Control Board (OCNWCB) has applied to the Washington State Ecology Department to use an aquatic herbicide to combat an infestation of Eurasian watermilfoil south of the international boundary in Osoyoos Lake.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB), the protectors of the Okanagan Valley's water supply, says the herbicide, Triclopyr, is not approved for use in Canada and could end up in the northern part of the lake due to back-swelling, although the main river channel that goes through the lake flows south.

“The potential risks to the ecosystem, drinking and agricultural water intakes, residents, and visitors on the Canadian side of the lake are unknown and may violate the Boundary Waters Treaty,” the OBWB said in a letter to the OCNWCB, asking them to consider other options for killing the weed.

Osoyoos mayor Stu Wells, who is also chair of the OBWB, says that at just 396 metres (1,300 feet) away, the application area is a bit too close for comfort.

“I was reading the description of the chemical. There’s a 12-hour ‘no swim area’ posted and all that, so there’s obviously a toxicity to it.”

OCNWCB manager Anna Lyon was out in the field and unavailable for comment, but according to news reports the county has been under pressure from cottage owners to deal with the milfoil, which is interfering with the use of the beaches.

The weed has also reportedly caused several deaths after swimmers became entangled in it.

Milfoil, which grows and spreads rapidly, forms thick stands under water and dense mats on the surface that can hamper water-based recreational activities. The invasive species crowds out native plants, and dense growth along the shoreline can negatively impact fish and wildlife.

The OBWB focuses on harvesting the top part of the plant in the summer and rototilling the root system in the fall and winter to keep it under control in Osoyoos Lake, which became contaminated with the weed in the 1970s.

After harvesting, the cut plant material is turned into mulch or compost and used by residents or commercial vegetable growers in the valley. “It’s just loaded with nutrients,” says Wells.

Lyon told the Osoyoos Times that her board is also considering other ways to deal with the aggressive weed, including requesting the use of the OBWB’s harvester and using biological control such as weevils.

Weevils are already being used in the valley to control Spotted Knapweed and Dalmatian Toadflax, says Wells, and he “gets real excited” about the possibility of using them on milfoil, something that’s currently being studied by Washington State University researchers.

“The neat part of it is that we would not be introducing an invasive species—they are in the lake right now. So we just have to find ways to improve their environment so that they eat more [milfoil].”

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The Washington State Department of Ecology said in a statement Monday that it has not approved the application from the OCNWCB to use chemicals to deal with milfoil in Osoyoos Lake.

“The Board has received funding to develop a plan to evaluate all options for plant control, including herbicides and mechanical means,” the statement said.

“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 best for all parties.”

Wells says he understands that with the situation being what it is, the OCNWCB needs a quick fix.

“They need some instantaneous results here; they’ve got people that can’t get in and use their waterfront.”

Wells stresses that he doesn’t want the issue to become “an international incident.”

“We’re not being adamant or anything. This is a small problem being dealt with in a friendly manner by both sides,” he says, adding that he understands that with the situation being what it is, the OCNWCB needs a quick fix.

“They need some instantaneous results here; they’ve got people that can’t get in and use their waterfront.”