

Okanagan beach cleanup hits a snag

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An overhaul of federal environmental legislation is just one of the problems facing officials trying to organize this year's cleanup of nuisance weeds along some Okanagan beaches.

Earlier this fall the Okanagan Basin Water Board began its annual milfoil rototilling campaign off beaches up and down the valley. Workers use specialized equipment on boats to uproot, and remove, the troublesome plant at about 30 popular swimming spots at a cost of \$500,000 a year.

While the job has been done annually for the past three decades, it wasn't until about three years ago that the water board was required to get environmental work permits from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, explained OBWB executive director Anna Warwick Sears.

However, this year's changes to the federal Fisheries Act mean the board will no longer require permission from the DFO because the work isn't expected to cause serious harm to a fishery. Authorization for the milfoil program now falls to the B.C. Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, which is particularly concerned about the presence of a potentially threatened mussel species at some of the sites.

Rocky Mountain Ridged Mussels have been proposed for listing under Canada's Species at Risk Act and have been found at Kin Beach in Vernon so permission to rototill there was held up while a plan was drafted to relocate the mussels if necessary.

The mussels' special status, combined with the changes to the Fisheries Act, have resulted in uncertainty that's made life difficult for her organization, Warwick Sears said.

"What the water board wants is a stable regulatory environment, and we're not satisfied with the answer that, 'Too bad, things are in flux and we can't give you an answer.' We want some stability," she said.

"What we're looking for from the province is some kind of acknowledgement that this (milfoil control) program is a priority, and that this is an extremely popular program," Warwick Sears said.

"We're not talking about the whole lake; we're just talking about the main public beaches and we just want to keep those public beaches and boating areas clear. It's not a huge thing to ask, considering how many people benefit," she continued.

"If our beaches become un-swimmable then people aren't going to want to come here anymore and that's going to effect everybody."

Grant Furness, the ecosystems section head at FLNRO's office in Penticton, said via email that the government appreciates the water board's work, but it must be careful to protect the mussels, which are believed to have been a First Nations food source.

"We recognize that (milfoil control) is an important strategy in helping preserve public recreational opportunities," he said.

"However, in recent years there has been a growing awareness of the negative impacts of this work on mussel populations in shallows of Okanagan Lake."

Furness noted his ministry is working with the water board “to develop a plan that will allow milfoil control to protect recreational values while at the same time effectively managing ecosystems and native mussel species, recognizing that in some cases both needs cannot be met.”

As for changes to the Fisheries Act, Furness said the resultant effects on fish management in B.C. “have yet to be outlined in policy.”

Warwick Sears said the water board has the authorizations it needs for this year’s milfoil rototilling campaign, but, “it’s not over yet with our discussions on how to get this incredibly confusing regulatory environment straightened out.”

Near Penticton, both Skaha Beach and the marina on Okanagan Lake have been targeted for rototilling this winter.

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