

Agreement with province clears way for milfoil control

By [Joe Fries - Penticton Western News](#)

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With the associated regulatory mess squared away, work can begin to mow down an invasive species that's made a home in local lakes.

Each summer, specially equipped boats set out on Okanagan lakes to trim back Eurasian watermilfoil plants growing along the shore of some of the region's most popular beaches.

During the winter months, the boats rototill the milfoil beds.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board has run the program for decades at a cost of about \$500,000 annually, but regulatory changes put this summer's work in limbo, before the B.C. government agreed this month to issue a five-year work permit.

"The story of bureaucracy sorting themselves out may not be sexy, but it has important consequences," said Anna Warwick Sears, the water board's executive director.

Changes to federal environmental regulations meant authorization for the work suddenly fell to the B.C. Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations.

Not only did the ministry have concerns about possible effects of milfoil control on fish spawning sites and some mussel species, it also had to figure out how to regulate a unique-in-B.C. system.

"The reason why it took a long time is because they had to work out a new program for us," said Warwick Sears.

“I believe that we’re the only local government agency that’s doing a milfoil control program.”

Water board staff worked with the provincial government to draft a new operations plan and map 53 kilometres of shoreline it routinely targets for milfoil control.

Warwick Sears said the five-year permit allows for ongoing government oversight of the work, but does not require a fresh application each year.

Grant Furness, the ministry’s ecosystems section head in Penticton, said in a statement that five-year agreements are “not the norm” for short-term work covered by the Water Act.

“However, in this case, due to the nature of the project, the parties agreed that a five-year deal would be the best option.”

The summer milfoil harvest was expected to get underway this month in Osoyoos and Wood lakes.

No work is planned this summer for beaches around Penticton.

According to the water board, milfoil, which arrived in the Okanagan in the 1970s, thrives in water up to six metres deep and can grow five centimetres per day, affecting water quality and habitat for aquatic species, plus negatively impacting recreation activities and property values.

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