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Water board pleased with government action but more needed on invasive mussels

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The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) is pleased to see action on invasive mussels increased in the province, and has some recommendations on the strategy. This, following news from the B.C. Government that Columbia Basin Trust is helping ramp up efforts by doubling down on the roving inspection stations currently provided by the province, increasing numbers from three to six.

"This is generally very good news. Inspection and decontamination in the Kootenays helps protect the Okanagan," says OBWB Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears. "That being said, the OBWB would prefer the province ensure the most defensive, conservative approach possible, with a minimum of five permanent inspection stations at major highway crossings on the B.C.-Alberta border."

OBWB's Operations and Grants Manager James Littlely puts it this way: "When I was in the Army and we learned to take a defensive posture, we would ensure that every approach route to our position was covered. We also sometimes had roving patrols, but we wouldn't watch some routes some of the time and then leave them open some of the time.

"Preventing a zebra and quagga mussel invasion is about taking a defensive posture and making sure that no watercraft gets through without an inspection. It is no different than the way we prevent drugs, weapons and criminals from coming across our borders. Only this time, we need to take this approach at the provincial border as well," he added.

Thanks to new federal regulations announced June 17th, Canadian Border Services Agency has the southern border covered. With today's announcement of three additional roving inspection stations, the province has all the resources and personnel that they need to defend all major road crossings.

"If they amend their tactical plan, from roving to permanent stations, they will have taken every step necessary to protect all B.C. waters. This isn't about action within our borders, it is about stopping invaders at our borders," noted Littlely.

The OBWB also recognizes the benefit of having roving stations to decontaminate boats that are found by CBSA officers at the Canada-U.S. border, but that just suggests we need the province to fully fund the protection program so that we can benefit from a full cordon of permanent stations as well as deploying roving stations where needed.

With only local tax dollars available, the OBWB has less funding than the Columbia Basin Trust to apply to the mussel issue and with the ongoing costs and responsibilities for milfoil control, the board is wary of the downloaded responsibility to fund its own inspection and decontamination stations. Instead, the OBWB has focused on its 'Don't Move a Mussel' public education initiative (www.DontMoveAMussel.ca) which was launched in 2013.

"We've spent more than \$209,000 on the campaign, and contributions from local business and media partners have helped build an effort worth at least \$624,000 over the three years. This does not include time spent by OBWB staff and board members in addressing this issue," said Sears.

"It's a difficult challenge to manage – keeping out a tiny mussel that's invisible as larvae, and can live in damp carpeting or bilge water for up to a month, and with boats being transported all over the western hemisphere. We welcome the news from the Columbia Basin Trust and the Province, because we need many different approaches working simultaneously to keep them out. And the more we can coordinate with each other, and the more we can be strategic, the more effective we'll be," she added.

At Tuesday's board meeting, directors passed a motion amending its recently adopted position statement on the mussels, recognizing federal government efforts to prevent the further spread of the mussels and other aquatic invasive species. The statement further recommends that water utilities and owners of in-lake infrastructure (e.g., private and commercial docks and water intakes) evaluate what upgrades and maintenance measures are needed should the mussels arrive, potential costs, proactive preventative measures, and other ways to avoid service interruptions. And, it also calls on the province to commit to funding all treatment and containment programs in infested waters should an invasion occur.

In an effort to further educate Okanagan residents, politicians and others, on the risks invasive mussels pose to the Okanagan, the OBWB has invited Julia Lew, with the Southern Nevada Water System, to provide the keynote at its AGM on Sept. 4 at Rotary Centre for the Arts. Lew will be presenting on her agency's invasive mussel response and management in Lake Mead. Registration for this event starts at 8:30am, with the program beginning at 9am. This is a free event.

For more on zebra and quagga mussels, the risk to the Okanagan and how to protect our waters, visit www.DontMoveAMussel.ca.

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