



North Okanagan-Shuswap MP Mel Arnold wants Ottawa to initiate immediate responses to an audit released Tuesday, examining aquatic invasive species (AIS), such as the zebra mussel. (Black Press -file photo)

North Okanagan-Shuswap MP calls for response to failing invasive species program

Mel Arnold said report shows federal government neglected duty to protect Canada's waters

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North Okanagan- Shuswap MP Mel Arnold is calling on the federal government to initiate immediate responses to an audit released Tuesday, examining aquatic invasive species (AIS).

The audit was performed by the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development and examined the federal government's measures to prevent aquatic invasive species from becoming established in Canadian waters.

"Although we have known for some time that there are significant gaps in the federal AIS program, especially for British Columbia, the Commissioner's report released today has exposed the government's mismanagement and neglect of their duty to protect our waters," said Arnold.

"It is clear that the federal government is failing in their responsibility to lead the management of aquatic invasive species nationally and their timelines for closing these gaps stretch to 2022 – this is unacceptable."

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In her report, Commissioner Julie Gelfand concluded that the federal government "had not taken the steps required to prevent invasive species, such as the zebra mussel..., from becoming established in Canada's waters despite commitments to do so over the years."

While the report states that "swift detection and action are critical to keep a species from becoming established," the audit found that the government "did not systematically collect or maintain information to track aquatic invasive species or the extent of their spread."

Canada's previous Conservative government ratified commitments under the Aichi Biodiversity Targets (2010) and United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) to prevent, control and eradicate invasive species. The previous government also introduced the Canadian Rapid Response Framework for Aquatic Invasive Species (2011) and the Aquatic Invasive Species Regulations (2015) – Canada's first national AIS regulations.

However, the Commissioner's report found the current federal government "had done limited enforcement of the Aquatic Invasive Species Regulations" and had failed to "prevent contaminated boats from entering Canada at the key international border crossing points." In response, the federal government committed to deploy seven new fishery officers to the Central and Arctic region and to the Quebec region, but none to Western Canada or British Columbia.

The Okanagan-Shuswap region's popularity with boaters from across the continent carries risks of an introduction of an AIS such as zebra mussels that attach to watercraft and watersport equipment. In 2013, the Okanagan Basin Water Board estimated that an introduction of invasive mussels in the Okanagan alone would cost the region \$43 million a year to just manage.

The Commissioner's report was introduced in Parliament as the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans approaches a study proposed by MP Arnold to examine the federal government's AIS program, how the program is resourced and how those resources are applied to AIS activities across Canada.

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"While the Commissioner's audit confirms existing gaps in the federal AIS program, I hope the upcoming committee study will determine what resources currently exist for AIS activities and how those resources are allocated," said Arnold. "We must determine how federal resources are shared across Canada and how to reboot the national program to ensure Canada can achieve our utmost to prevent the continued spread of invasives, especially zebra and quagga mussels, across Canada."