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# Mussels, mussels everywhere — with OBWB stuck in the middle

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The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) has mussels on its mind — in more ways than one.

The Board learned today it had earned a reprieve from proposed federal endangered listing of the native Rocky Mountain Ridged Mussel, a native found along Okanagan lakeshores.

“We are very pleased with this decision,” said Anna Warwick Sears, OBWB’s Executive Director. “It allows more flexibility for us to manage invasive milfoil, keep the beaches clean, and protect water quality,” adding the Board is now renewing its call to be permitted to continue rototilling invasive milfoil weeds at public beaches and boating areas.

Rototilling involves physically removing the roots of the plant from the bottom of a lake. It is also referred to as de-rooting and is accomplished in the late fall and winter through the use of floating “rototillers.”

According to the OBWB, “rototilling minimizes interference with water recreation, reduces the spread of viable plant fragments, and eliminates the need to dispose of plant material.”

But, says the province, it also endangers the native mussels.

“The ministry recognizes the threat that invasive milfoil poses to the recreation and tourism values within the Okanagan basin,” reads part of a letter sent from Gerry MacDougall, regional executive director of the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development.

“However, these impacts have to be weighed against the need to adequately protect native ecosystems and the species that inhabit them.”

Last fall, in an effort to protect the mussel, the province ruled that the board was not allowed to rototill within 100 metres of any live Rocky Mountain Mussel or shell fragment.

While the Board is asking both the federal and provincial governments to reconsider efforts to protect native mussels already living here, it is also demanding more be done to keep invasive mussels out.

And there’s the conundrum.

The Water Board, in a letter to George Heyman, the B.C. Minister of Environment and Climate Change, is calling for additional regulations to further protect lakes, rivers and streams from invasive mussels.

In particular, the OBWB is repeating its call for legislation requiring that all watercraft entering B.C. be inspected before being allowed to launch in provincial waters.

It is also recommending the province implement “pull the plug” legislation already implemented in Alberta and in northwest states, requiring drain plugs be removed from watercraft before transport.

“We are going to be pushing for senior governments to do all they can to protect our waters,” explained OBWB Chair — and Osoyoos Mayor — Sue McKortoff.

“Our lakes are not only an important tourist destination, they are important as a source of drinking water, to our fishery and the Okanagan’s delicate ecosystem, and much more.”

Now that the native mussels are no longer under immediate consideration for an endangered listing, the OBWB hopes the provincial government will reconsider its prohibitions against milfoil rototilling.

“It’s within the government’s authority to issue the permit and allow us to resume our weed control operations,” explained Ms. Sears.

“We are only asking to continue our operations in high-value public areas. The people need their beaches, and milfoil causes harm to a whole range of environmental values. It needs to be controlled.”

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