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Invasive mussels: Fisheries minister asked to do more to protect Shuswap, Okanagan lakes

Shuswap Watershed Council, and Okanagan Basin Water Board highlight concerns

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Two Shuswap-Okanagan organizations plan to bring Canada's new Fisheries minister up to speed on invasive mussels concerns while arguing more must be done at the federal government level.

"To date, we believe the federal government has not taken sufficient action on this issue, nor has it provided equitable funding to stop the spread of invasive zebra and quagga mussels," states a letter to Bernadette Jordan, the newly minted minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, penned by the Shuswap Watershed Council (SWC) and the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB).

"Every year we experience invasive mussel-infested watercraft arriving at our borders — heading to the Okanagan, the Shuswap, and other B.C. locations, with the vast majority coming from mussel-infested waters within Canada," said OBWB chair Sue McKortoff.

"And every year, our water is put at risk — for drinking, for fish and other wildlife. Our famous beaches, our water infrastructure, and more, is also put at risk."

Although there are no known infestations of zebra or quagga mussels in B.C. or Western Canada, an introduction would have devastating and costly impacts to water quality, fish populations and habitat, water utilities, hydro-electric facilities, beaches, and property values, argues the OBWB.

Statistics recently released from B.C.'s mussel inspection program indicates 22 mussel-infested watercraft were intercepted on their way into the province. Of these, 16 were from Ontario.

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Shuswap and Okanagan Lakes are especially at risk of an invasion because they see a large influx of watercraft each summer, including from mussel-infested areas of North America.

As well, federal research has noted the Okanagan and Shuswap is at high risk due to warm water temperatures and high calcium content in the waters, which increases the chance of the mussels' survival.

More recently, a report from the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans revealed in June 2019 also found that the federal government's protection of Canadian lakes and waterways against aquatic invasive species is inadequate.

"We are very concerned that zebra or quagga mussels could arrive in British Columbia," said Paul Demenok, chair of the Shuswap Watershed Council.

"We know from the experience of others who are now dealing with the invasive mussels, that the cost of effective prevention is so much smaller than what it costs to manage the mussels once they arrive.

"We are lucky. We still have the opportunity to keep them out, but we need stronger support from the federal government on this issue."

The SWC and OBWB are asking the federal government to build upon a previous financial commitment of \$400,000 in August 2018.

Specifically, they are asking for a new investment in B.C. that could support the expansion of three key programs including watercraft inspection, early detection monitoring and education and outreach.

The SWC and OBWB are also asking the DFO to contain known mussel infestations by enforcing new prevention measures, such as watercraft inspection and decontamination for travellers leaving infested watersheds, and new measures to prevent float planes and amphibious watercraft from transporting aquatic invasive species.

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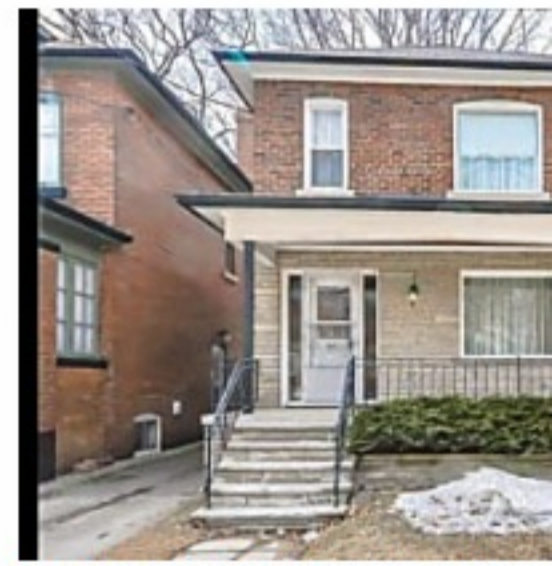
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