

March 9, 2022

NEWS RELEASE

WATER BOARD CALLS FOR STRONGER MUSSEL PROTECTION AS COVID TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS EASE

Kelowna, B.C. – As boating season quickly approaches and COVID-19 travel restrictions ease, the Okanagan Basin Water Board is calling on the province to bolster its Invasive Mussel Defence Program (IMDP) in preparation for what is expected to be a busy tourist season. Today, the local government agency sent a letter to B.C.’s Minister of Environment and Climate Change, George Heyman, with a list of six calls to action.

“Since 2015, the IMDP has prevented 137 infested watercraft from entering provincial waters by conducting more than 220,000 inspections. Many of the infested watercraft were headed to high-risk Okanagan waters. Still, gaps remain in prevention,” the letter reads.

For one, there are still motorists with watercraft who are failing to stop at mandatory, open inspection stations. Given that inspectors snagged 17 zebra and/or quagga mussel-fouled watercraft this summer during times when the stations were open, it raises the question as to how many more come in outside of inspection hours.

Also, a review of last summer’s provincial mussel inspection numbers indicates that, for the second year in a row, the Okanagan is the top destination for these watercraft. This year, eight of the 17 infested watercraft were headed to our valley.

“If we are B.C.’s #1 destination for incoming mussel-infested watercraft, and we are encouraging tourism, we need to be better prepared,” explains Sue McKortoff, Chair of the Water Board (OBWB) and Mayor of the border-town of Osoyoos.

Watercraft purchases have increased in the last couple of years, on both sides of the border, as people were staying closer to home. Now with the border opening up, it’s expected more people will be coming with their water toys, increasing the chances of invasive mussels being introduced to B.C. waters.

The OBWB’s six recommendations include:

1. Maintain IMDP core program funding at 2021 levels of minimum \$3.5 million per year, adjusted for inflation going forward.
2. Introduce “pull-the-plug” legislation, requiring all watercraft to remove drain plugs prior to travelling on B.C. roads.
3. Review and update B.C.’s 2014 Early Detection, Rapid Response (EDRR) Plan for invasive mussels, and provide a window for public consultation prior to final publishing.
4. Provide toolkits and resources for local governments to conduct vulnerability assessments and put in place mitigation measures like retrofitting in-water infrastructure.
5. Introduce legislation to require all out-of-province watercraft to be inspected prior to being launched in B.C. waters.
6. Provide additional funding to invasive species groups in high-risk regions for monitoring, outreach and education.

“A 2013 OBWB study found the cost of an infestation to our region would be at least \$42 mill. annually to manage,” the OBWB letter states. “As such, we remain committed to protecting B.C. waters and supporting provincial efforts. This commitment has included delivery of our ‘Don’t Move A Mussel’ campaign, promoting

the clean, drain, dry message, and valued at more than \$996,000 to date, and another \$266,000 in funding over that time provided to the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society to conduct direct boater outreach and more.”

“If invasive mussels arrived here, it’s not just people who drive boats who will be affected. It will affect everyone,” cautioned McKortoff. The mussels will become a recurring maintenance expense for in-lake infrastructure such as water lines, docks, and bridges. They will affect water quality and harm aquatic ecosystems. Plus, when the mussels were introduced to Lake Winnipeg, it took only two years for the molluscs to reproduce in such numbers that beaches became foul-smelling and un-walkable, she added. “Can you imagine not taking your kids or grandkids to the beach in summer?”

Please find attached, the OBWB’s letter to the province with recommendations.

For more information on zebra and quagga mussels, the risks to the Okanagan, and how to prevent their spread, please visit www.DontMoveAMussel.ca.

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Hon. George Heyman
B.C. Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy
PO Box 9360 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, B.C. V8W 9M2

March 9, 2022

Re: Calls to Action for Invasive Mussel Prevention

Dear Minister Heyman,

Thank you for your correspondence of April 7th, 2021, responding to our continued calls for action to prevent the spread of invasive zebra and quagga mussels into B.C. As the boating season quickly approaches, I am writing again on behalf of the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) to call for continued support and proper resourcing of the province's Invasive Mussel Defence Program (IMDP), recognizing the significant cost if invasive mussels became established here.

The OBWB acknowledges the significant improvements in the province's IMDP and its work with counterparts in neighbouring jurisdictions over the past seven years. Since 2015, the IMDP has prevented 137 infested watercraft from entering provincial waters by conducting more than 220,000 inspections. Many of the infested watercraft were headed to high-risk Okanagan waters. Still, gaps remain in prevention, and other significant issues remain for limiting the spread and damage should an infestation occur in any part of the province. We urge you to consider the following priority actions to enhance the protection of B.C. waters.

1. Maintain IMDP core program funding at 2021 levels of minimum \$3.5 million per year, adjusted for inflation going forward.

The IMDP has become the first line of defense to protect provincial waters, but the program's budget allocation has changed annually, and has been dependent on a number of non-government funders, including Fortis BC which has not renewed its original funding agreement. This program is important to the environment and economy of the province and should have stable, predictable annual funding.

2. Introduce "pull-the-plug" legislation, requiring all watercraft to remove drain plugs prior to travelling on B.C. roads.

We understand that the province is pursuing this legislation as part of updates to the Wildlife Act. We strongly support this action and urge you to prioritize it as another boating season is quickly approaching.

3. Review and update B.C.'s Early Detection, Rapid Response (EDRR) Plan for invasive mussels, and provide a window for public consultation prior to final publishing.

The EDRR is an important document that provides direction on how to rapidly detect and respond to a new infestation of invasive mussels. We believe it is important to consult with the public, and especially local and regional invasive species groups to understand where there may be gaps in the plan, or where more detail may be needed, beyond what is provided by the provincial inter-ministry working group. Complex watersheds, like the Columbia, the Okanagan and the Fraser would also be better protected with further planning for

containment and long-term management strategies, beyond what little is considered in the current version of the EDRR. Local consultation could provide support for developing those plans.

4. Provide toolkits and resources for local governments to conduct vulnerability assessments and put in place mitigation measures like retrofitting in-water infrastructure.

In your reply to our previous call for this action, you stated that “this has not been something that local governments have been asking for, individually or through UBCM,” and that it “will be considered for the future, but not considered as an immediate priority.” The OBWB is a local government agency, a partnership of three regional districts, and provides services to 12 municipalities and works with Okanagan First Nations. Part of our mandate is “to present proposals and recommendations to appropriate agencies, being municipalities or governments, according to jurisdiction and responsibility.” We will work with local governments to support this call to action and work to have it brought forward to UBCM.

We have extensive experience providing technical and scientific support to local governments, including in the form of toolkits and guides, and are a service partner with CivicInfoBC, providing the Planning Guides resource database. The OBWB could provide project management and coordination in partnership with provincial staff to develop a local government guide to vulnerability assessments and mitigation measures for invasive mussels. We would welcome an opportunity to discuss this further.

5. Introduce legislation to require all out-of-province watercraft to be inspected prior to being launched in B.C. waters.

OBWB first made this call to action in May 2016 and has called for it again every year since. While we recognize that boat registration and safety are regulated at the federal level, the province does have the authority to regulate activities on provincial waters, similar to motor vessel restrictions on certain lakes as outlined in the fishing regulations. Alternatively, the province could call on the federal government to regulate watercraft in B.C., under their authority in the Fisheries Act, Aquatic Invasive Species Regulations 43 (1), or through the Canada Shipping Act, providing extra tools to protect B.C. waters beyond the current scope of the Invasive Mussel Defence Program.

Analysis of provincial inspection numbers suggests a 30% chance in any given year that a non-compliant, motorized watercraft will be carrying invasive mussels. This only accounts for watercraft that were recorded failing to stop at open inspection stations and does not include any craft that may have entered outside of inspection station hours. In 2021 this accounted for more than 580 motorized watercraft, and more than 3,500 non-motorized watercraft. This is an important gap we feel has not been given due consideration over the past six years.

6. Provide additional funding to invasive species groups in high-risk regions for monitoring, outreach and education.

Current funding for ongoing water monitoring, administered through the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund, is set to expire after the 2022 season. Part of this funding was provided by the federal government over a three-year term. We would strongly support any provincial request for federal funding to continue this program, as well as federal or provincial funding to regional invasive species groups to continue or expand their outreach and education campaigns. These non-profit groups provide a significant service to their regions, but often struggle with operational costs, and the time required to apply for funding. Ongoing, direct funding would enhance their ability to monitor, engage and educate, bolstering provincial efforts.

A 2013 OBWB study found the cost of an infestation to our region would be at least \$42 mill. annually to manage. As such, we remain committed to protecting B.C. waters and supporting provincial efforts. This

commitment has included delivery of our “[Don't Move A Mussel](#)” campaign, promoting the clean, drain, dry message, and valued at more than \$996,000 to date, and another \$266,000 in funding provided to the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society to conduct direct boater outreach and more.

We look forward to hearing from you, and supporting the enhanced efforts noted above to keep B.C. waters free from invasive mussels.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sue McKortoff".

Sue McKortoff, Chair
Okanagan Basin Water Board

CC:

- Hon. Josie Osborne, B.C. Minister of Land, Water and Resource Stewardship
- Okanagan MLAs: Harwinder Sandhu, Norm Letnick, Renee Merrifield, Ben Stewart, Dan Ashton, Roly Russell
- Okanagan Nation Alliance, Chiefs Executive Council
- Okanagan Local Government Chairs and Mayors
- Okanagan MPs: Mel Arnold, Tracy Gray, Dan Albas, Richard Cannings
- Pacific NorthWest Economic Region: Matt Morrison, Chief Executive Officer
- Invasive Species Council of B.C.: Gail Wallin, Executive Director
- Okanagan Chambers of Commerce
- Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association
- Union of BC Municipalities