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Federal muscle needed to fight invasive mussels

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Keeping invasive zebra and quagga mussels out of the lakes of the Okanagan region requires federal government support, according to the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB).

With these two varieties of mussels now infesting lakes and waterways in Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba, there is a steady march westward as several “close calls” with mussel-infested watercraft being intercepted coming into Saskatchewan, Alberta and B.C., have demonstrated, the OBWB says.

Because of the intra-provincial jurisdictions involved, the OBWB says federal government involvement is necessary and the water board is urging the new federal fisheries minister from B.C. to take steps in addressing the spread of invasive mussels.



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Last week, the OBWB sent a letter to Joyce Murray, Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard. The letter calls for a renewal of multi-year federal funding, which is due to expire in 2023, for invasive mussel outreach, education and lake monitoring.

“We’re happy to see a fisheries minister appointed from B.C. and hope she has a good understanding of water issues in the Okanagan and around the province,” said Sue McKortoff, chair of the OBWB and Mayor of Osoyoos.

Reviewing B.C. inspection stats from last year, McKortoff insists that invasive mussel prevention requires federal support.

Last year alone, B.C.’s inspection stations intercepted 17 mussel-fouled watercraft, eight of which were headed to the Okanagan. Of this total, the greatest number – seven – came from Ontario, two came from Manitoba and one from Quebec, the other seven came from various U.S. states.

The OBWB, through its Okanagan WaterWise program, has been delivering the ‘Don’t Move A Mussel’ program since 2013. The water board has also been funding the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society (OASISS) to extend this outreach.

“As a result, awareness in the Okanagan regarding these mussels is very high, but we have no authority outside our region, so provincial and federal support is absolutely necessary,” McKortoff added.

In its letter, the OBWB acknowledges Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) efforts to work with the province of Manitoba to contain the mussels and work with Canada Border Services Agency to improve enforcement of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) regulations at international borders.

One option that the DFO notes in its correspondence with the OBWB is the authorization by provinces of “deleterious substances”, in essence pesticides, to prevent, control or eradicate aquatic invasive species.

“While this is an important tool for provincial governments to have in limited cases, it is not an effective tool to address invasive mussels in larger water bodies which are hydrologically connected to large river systems – like we have in the Okanagan,” the DFO states in its letter.

In addition, the letter notes, Okanagan lakes are a source of drinking water and past experience with chemical treatment of invasive milfoil in the 1970s has shown “there is no social licence for this method in our local communities.”

McKortoff underscores that this is not a practical solution for the Okanagan and most other regions of B.C., saying that prevention is Western Canada’s best defense. “We recognize that we each have a role in keeping zebra and quagga mussels out – as individuals, as local and regional areas, but that we need provincial and federal government support. That’s the only way we will be able to keep our waters safe.”

A 2013 OBWB study found the cost of an infestation to the Okanagan would be at least \$42 million annually to manage, recognizing the impact on fisheries, tourism, aquatic infrastructure, and more.

In response, the OBWB–Okanagan WaterWise launched its Don’t Move A Mussel (DMM) campaign, valued between 2013 and 2021 at more than \$996,000. It has also provided another \$266,000 over that time to OASISS to extend the reach of DMM, conduct direct boater outreach and more.

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

