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First time weed war planned for South Okanagan lake

RON SEYMOUR Jun 2, 2022 Updated Jun 2, 2022



For the first time, Eurasian milfoil will be trimmed in Vaseux Lake in the South Okanagan this summer. Permission for the cutting operation was received Thursday by the Okanagan Basin Water Board from the Canadian Wildlife Service.

Norm Gaumont, Vaseux Lake Stewardship Association



The first-time trimming of Eurasian milfoil in Vaseux Lake in the South Okanagan is expected to begin in July.

Motorized vessels have long been banned from the lake to protect migratory bird sanctuaries but permission was given Thursday by the Canadian Wildlife Service for the Okanagan Basin Water Board to deploy one of its weed harvesting machines this summer.

Support for the weed-cutting program has also been given by the Osoyoos Indian Band as part of efforts by Indigenous groups to restore a salmon fishery to the Okanagan.

"Vaseux can get very weedy in the summer and there are concerns the milfoil can be something of a choke point for salmon that are migrating," James Littlely, operations and grants manager for the OBWB, said Thursday in an interview.

Reducing the weeds will improve the passage for sockeye, coho, and chinook salmon, Littlely says, and also reduce the cover used by other species of fish, such as bass that were introduced for fishing purposes, that prey on salmon.

"They can kind of lurk in the weeds, use it for cover, and prey on the salmon and native fish smolts as they go by," Little said. "Milfoil actually favours invasive fish over native fish."

Vaseux Lake illustrates what larger Okanagan lakes would likely look like had not the Eurasian milfoil control program began in the early 1970s.

"The conditions that were starting to emerge in the '70s, in places like Kelowna, all the beaches and shallow areas were covered in mats of milfoil, and then algae was growing on top of that," Littlely said. "If the control program didn't exist, a lot of our lakes, prime real estate, and best beaches would be unswimmable, essentially."

The motorized vessel ban for Vaseux Lake will continue to apply to other boats not operated by the OBWB.

Since the paddlewheel-propelled harvesting machines are flat-bottomed and travel slowly, they won't produce the kind of wake that can disrupt the habitat of shore-nesting waterfowl, Littlely said.

Rototilling machines, used by the OBWB to de-root milfoil in the winter, would be more disruptive and won't be deployed in Vaseux Lake.

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