

August 16, 2023

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**WATER BOARD ISSUES UPDATED CALLS TO ACTION ON INVASIVE MUSSELS AS PROVINCE SNAGS MUSSEL-INFESTED WATERCRAFT**

**Kelowna, B.C. - Sylix Territory** – As mussel-infested watercraft continue to make their way towards the Okanagan and other water-related destinations this summer, the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) has issued a letter to the B.C. Government with several calls to action.

“While B.C. provincial staff and Conservation Officers continue to do very good work through the Invasive Mussel Defence Program (IMDP) with the limited resources they have, serious gaps remain. Rather than reinforcing the program, the budget has been severely cut in recent years, representing a significant risk to much of the province, including the Okanagan,” the letter begins, noting “a 61% reduction in the number of watercraft inspected” from 2019 to 2022. The letter is directed to B.C. Minister Water, Land and Resource Stewardship Nathan Cullen, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy George Heyman, Minister of Energy, Mines and Low Carbon Innovation Josie Osborne, the Parliamentary Secretaries for Fisheries and Aquaculture MLA Kelly Greene and Watershed Restoration MLA Fin Donnelly.

And most recent stats for this summer, show that between April and July 14, 2023, the IMDP has intercepted 80 high risk watercraft on their way into B.C. Of these, eight were confirmed to have adult invasive mussels and three were headed to the Okanagan. (The other five were destined for the Thompson-Nicola [1], Lower Mainland [2], and unconfirmed destinations [2].)

“Frankly, I’m very disturbed. Once again we are the top destination of mussel-infested watercraft,” OBWB Exec. Dir. Anna Warwick Sears said.

The letter to the province includes the following calls to action:

1. Commit funding to the IMDP of no less than \$4 million per year (all sources), indexed to inflation for at least 10 years.
2. Enhance support to recruit and retain B.C. Conservation Officers, Auxiliary Conservation Officers, and other staff as needed to 2019 levels (64 inspectors) to ensure sufficient staffing for the IMDP.
3. Commit to introducing “pull-the-plug” legislation to be in effect prior to the 2024 boating season.
4. Update the provincial Early Detection, Rapid Response plan (EDRR), including a round of consultation with partner organizations prior to finalization.
5. Lead a planning process with regional partners to create long-term response, containment, and control plans in regions at high risk of introduction and vulnerable to infestation, including the Okanagan, Shuswap, and Kootenay Regions.

Also, the OBWB questions the ministerial mandates related to the invasive mussel issue. B.C.’s IMDP is now under the jurisdiction of the B.C. Minister of Water, Land, and Resource Stewardship. However, given the expected impacts of these mussels on the province’s environment and ecosystems, and impacts on water quality, the OBWB is requesting that B.C. Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy

remain involved in the planning and prevention of invasive mussels and potential mitigation of harm. In addition, it recommends that the B.C. Minister of Energy, Mines, and Low Carbon Innovation engage on the file given the increasing importance of invasive mussel prevention for B.C. Hydro and other power producers.

The OBWB remains committed to doing what it can to prevent an infestation, the letter states. In particular, the Water Board, at its own cost, is developing a mussel vulnerability guide for local governments, water purveyors, and other industrial users that rely on in-water infrastructure. The Water Board's Okanagan WaterWise program also continues to provide public education and outreach through its "Don't Move A Mussel" campaign, with contributions valued at over \$1 million to date, and has provided more than \$400,000 in funding to the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society to conduct direct boater outreach.

"Preventing invasive mussels is a top priority of the Water Board, and our member communities. Every year that goes by, the risk increases. We cannot let down our guard or we risk losing the best of what we love about the Okanagan – our beautiful clean water," added Sears. "The Province of B.C. says that this is a priority issue for them, but they have not been budgeting like it is a priority. This has to change."

Please find attached, the OBWB's letter to the province.

For more information on zebra and quagga mussels, the risks to the Okanagan, and how to prevent their spread, please visit [www.DontMoveAMussel.ca](http://www.DontMoveAMussel.ca).

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**Re: Calls to Action to protect B.C. waters from Invasive Mussels**

Dear Ministers,

Our most recent letter of June 8, 2023 expressed concern about the economic and environmental impacts of invasive zebra and quagga mussels on the Okanagan. In that letter, we committed to providing calls for action once we had completed our research. While B.C. Provincial staff and Conservation Officers continue to do very good work through the Invasive Mussel Defence Program (IMDP) with the limited resources they have, serious gaps remain. Rather than reinforcing the program, the budget has been severely cut in recent years, representing a significant risk to much of the province, including the Okanagan.

An analysis of the IMDP shows that between 2019 and 2022, staffing and inspection stations have been cut in half, leading to a 61% reduction in the number of watercraft inspected. B.C. is also the only jurisdiction remaining in western Canada without “pull-the-plug” legislation for draining boats. These cuts are especially troubling, given the province’s own economic analysis that shows an annual cost of a mussel infestation in B.C. would range from \$64 to \$129 million annually. This cost estimate does not include impacts to aquatic ecosystems and fish populations. The economic analysis also shows that every major population centre and agricultural region in the province is at risk of a moderate-to-high infestation based on water chemistry, affecting drinking water infrastructure, industrial facilities, hydro generation, recreation and food production as well as ecosystems.

We appreciate the time you have taken to provide responses to our previous calls to action, and the actions that have been taken by your ministries to date (including B.C. Hydro and other power providers). We provide

the following Calls to Action, asking for you to demonstrate your ongoing and firm commitment to protect the waters of B.C. from these devastating invasive mussels.

### Calls to Action

- 1. Commit funding to the IMDP of no less than \$4 million per year (all sources), indexed to inflation for at least 10 years.**

The 2019 budget for the IMDP, the year the program conducted the most inspections, was \$3.5 million, equivalent to \$4.04 million today. This is the minimum level of funding the program should receive. In 2022, the IMDP ran only six inspection stations, with a reduced staff of 32 inspectors, (down from 12 stations and 64 staff in 2019). For 2023, the plan was for 49 inspectors, and six stations with two roving stations. OBWB staff have noted that while there is a plan for inspection station hours, these have not always been met and stations have been closed when they were supposed to be open.

In addition, to date, the IMDP has been partly funded through partnerships with BC Hydro, Columbia Basin Trust, Columbia Power Corporation and Fortis BC. The new economic analysis shows that 60% of hydro generation facilities (accounting for 80% of hydro generating capacity in the province) are at risk from invasive mussels. The projected costs to hydro power facilities is \$17.1 – \$23.3 million per year; the single largest impact for a given sector. Further, in the Upper Peace region, the location of the new Site C dam is at very high risk for invasive mussels, creating vulnerability and unforeseen costs for that project. These funding partnerships must continue, with long-term commitments for stable and reliable funding, especially from Crown Corporations.

- 2. Enhance support to recruit and retain B.C. Conservation Officers, Auxiliary Conservation Officers, and other staff as needed to 2019 levels (64 inspectors) to ensure sufficient staffing for the IMDP.**

Following major economic and workforce changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we understand that temporary, seasonal jobs are more difficult to fill, particularly for positions requiring specialized training and personnel in positions of public trust. We ask that you work together with other appropriate ministries and agencies to recruit and retain seasonal staff for the IMDP. This may require increasing pay levels to attract qualified candidates. Also, it is very important to meet the housing needs of staff who are sometimes deployed to remote locations during the height of tourist and fire-fighting seasons, when competition for accommodations is highest.

- 3. Commit to introducing “pull-the-plug” legislation to be in effect prior to the 2024 boating season.**

Since July 2019, the OBWB has called on the province for “pull the plug” legislation, requiring all watercraft owners to remove their drain plug prior to transporting vessels on public roads, ensuring that vessels have been cleaned, drained and dried before launching in B.C. waters. In the four years since then, all other Western Canadian provinces have put this legislation in place, with B.C. as the only exception. A “Pull the Plug” law is the minimum legislative bar, given that B.C. has been consistently reluctant to require all watercraft entering B.C. to report for an inspection prior to launching in provincial waters.

- 4. Update the provincial Early Detection, Rapid Response plan (EDRR), including a round of consultation with partner organizations prior to finalization.**

The current EDRR was published in 2015, prior to the establishment of the IMDP. Since then, the province has gathered significant information on watercraft travel patterns, at-risk lakes, and economic factors. B.C. has also had to respond to mussel-infested moss balls, and several near misses with contaminated vessels. While the federal government has now approved the use of potash as a rapid response tool for invasive mussels; potash has proven ineffective in large water bodies like Okanagan Lake, and would not be acceptable in this primary drinking water source for Okanagan communities. The new EDRR should incorporate all lessons learned and look to longer-term options for ongoing regional containment, quarantine, and control methods.

**5. Lead a planning process with regional partners to create long-term response, containment, and control plans in regions at high risk of introduction and vulnerable to infestation, including the Okanagan, Shuswap, and Kootenay Regions.**

With new information on watercraft travel patterns and water chemistry, we know which regions are at most risk of introduction due to the high number of watercraft travelling there, and which water bodies are at greatest risk due to water chemistry and temperature. With this information, along with lessons learned from other jurisdictions, it is possible to create plans which could reduce the time for containment of a lake from days to hours and reduce the time for attempted eradication from weeks to days. This planning process could also help to identify regional gaps in prevention, prepare infrastructure, solicit public engagement and feedback, and identify resources for long-term control.

**Ministerial Mandates**

It will take a cross-government effort to protect B.C. from invasive mussels. We are pleased that the IMDP is now under the jurisdiction of the B.C. Minister of Water, Land, and Resource Stewardship. Given the potential impacts of invasive mussels on watersheds and fisheries, we have included the Parliamentary Secretary of Fisheries and Aquaculture, and the Parliamentary Secretary of Watershed Restoration in this request for action.

We understand that the IMDP has been removed from the portfolio of the B.C. Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy. However, given the expected impacts of these mussels on the province's environment and ecosystems, and their impacts on water quality, we expect this ministry to continue to be involved in the planning, prevention, and (if necessary) mitigation of harm from invasive mussels in B.C.

This is the first time we have directed our invasive mussel Calls to Action to the Minister of Energy, Mines, and Low Carbon Innovation. Given the increasing importance of invasive mussel prevention for B.C. Hydro and other power producers, we expect this ministry to become increasingly involved with the planning, prevention, mitigation, and funding of the IMDP.

**The OBWB's Commitment**

The OBWB is committed to being an active partner with B.C. on invasive mussel prevention. Most recently, we have been preparing a guide for local governments, water purveyors, and other industrial users to conduct vulnerability assessments on in-water infrastructure. Currently in draft form, *Preparing for Invasive Mussels: Vulnerability Assessment Guide for Raw Water Infrastructure* is undergoing technical review from partners and agencies across the Pacific Northwest, including B.C. ministry staff. Once final, the OBWB will make the guide available throughout B.C., and to neighbouring jurisdictions. This guide was funded solely by the OBWB with in-kind contributions from reviewers. The OBWB also continues to provide public education and outreach through its Don't Move A Mussel: Clean, Drain, Dry campaign ([www.DontMoveAMussel.ca](http://www.DontMoveAMussel.ca)),

with contributions valued at over \$1 million to date, and has provided more than \$400,000 in funding to the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society to conduct direct boater outreach.

We would be happy to continue to provide in-kind support, through reviewing the updated EDRR, and working with the province on a regional response, containment, and control plan for the Okanagan, as well as facilitating contact with Okanagan College and UBC Okanagan to recruit students for seasonal inspector positions. We look forward to seeing your rapid response to these Calls to Action, and especially to a renewed IMDP with long-term, sufficient funding and support. The alternative, should zebra and/or quagga mussels become established in the Okanagan, is too costly to our environment, our economy, and our way of life.

Yours truly,



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- 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
- Shuswap Watershed Council
- Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society