



Robert Melvin (left) and Maddy Laslett of the Invasive Mussel Defence Program speak about the most common places mussels take root on boats during a workshop in Sicamous June 26. The Okanagan Basin Water Board has reiterated a request for more federal funds to combat mussels to new federal fisheries minister Jonathan Wilkinson. (Jodi Brak/Salmon Arm Observer)

## Okanagan water board seeks mussels funding

Okanagan Basin Water Board sends request to new federal fisheries minister

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The Okanagan Basin Water Board supports the federal government's recent funding announcement to address invasive mussels.

The board has resent a prioritized list for more action and requested an in-person meeting.

"We are gravely concerned about the impact zebra and quagga mussels would have on the Okanagan and Western Canada," said OBWB Chair Tracy Gray, referencing a letter sent by the board to newly appointed Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard Jonathan Wilkinson, reiterating a call for federal funding made in April.

"We need the federal government to take stronger action and help reinforce our defences and contain these mussels where they are at and work with western provinces, states, and the U.S. government to protect our waters.

"We do not want to be in a situation like we've heard from officials in Manitoba and elsewhere, where we are infested with zebra or quagga mussels and regret not doing more to prevent it."

### RELATED: Water board preparing for mussels

According to a 2013 study conducted for the OBWB, the cost of an infestation to the Okanagan alone was conservatively estimated at \$42 million a year in direct costs and lost revenues.

"While we welcome the recent federal announcement of \$133,000 annually over three years for public outreach and education and \$25,000 annually over four years for research, we ask that you consider the specific actions listed...for your annual budget, which will make a more sustained, substantial contribution to this effort," the letter to Wilkinson reads.

Specifically, the letter calls for more funding for increased lake monitoring, enhanced inspection program resources, increased outreach, education and research, increased coordination and preparedness, support of expanded B.C. inspection timings and activities; and, increased capacity of B.C.'s Conservation Officer Service K9 Unit. The total request for annual federal funding is \$2,055,000, matching provincial funding.

These actions, the letter notes, "will have greater direct, long-term impacts to protect our B.C. waters."

"Last year, the U.S. federal government provided \$16 million (USD) to match funding in Pacific Northwest states for mussel prevention efforts. This year, the U.S. Department of Interior requested another \$12 million (USD), which is pending congressional approval," said Gray.

"Looking at last year's B.C. inspection stats, we have more infested watercraft trying to enter B.C. from eastern Canada than the U.S. We must increase our efforts on this side of the border."

In 2017, B.C. inspection stations intercepted 14 mussel-fouled watercraft from Ontario, two from Quebec, and nine from various U.S. locations.

"It seems appropriate that this be included in the annual federal budget since it is a national issue with huge implications for infrastructure, the environment — including fisheries, and more," said Gray.

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For its part, the OBWB has been sounding the alarm about the mussels since 2012.

At that time, the OBWB and its Okanagan WaterWise outreach and education program launched the Don't Move A Mussel campaign. Since then, it has spent more than \$277,000 in local tax dollars on the initiative, and with support from the Okanagan business community, delivered a program worth over \$800,000.

It has also provided \$165,000 in local tax dollars between 2013 and 2018 to the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society to assist with direct boater outreach and to conduct mussel monitoring. There has also been extensive staff and board time spent working on this file.

The OBWB has also been an active participant in the Pacific Northwest Economic Region's Invasive Species Working Group, and actively partnered with the Province of B.C., local governments, the Invasive Species Council of B.C., the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce, and many other organizations on this file.

The letter includes an offer to share the Water Board's "significant local experience and broad reach into the community."

"The OBWB would be pleased to add our expertise to your efforts and work with the groups recently funded by DFO to support both the research and the outreach in the Okanagan and B.C."

[newstips@vernonmorningstar.com](mailto:newstips@vernonmorningstar.com)

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