

MEDIA RELEASE

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Shuswap Watershed Council and Okanagan Basin Water Board pen joint letter to new Fisheries Minister, calling for action on Invasive Mussels

The Shuswap Watershed Council (SWC) and Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB), two watershed organizations based in the Interior region of B.C., have sent a letter to the new federal Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, Hon. Bernadette Jordan, to express their ongoing concern about the threat of aquatic invasive Zebra and Quagga mussels and call for more action from the federal government.

“Every year we experience invasive mussel-infested watercraft arriving at our borders – heading to the Okanagan, the Shuswap, and other B.C. locations, with the vast majority coming from mussel-infested waters within Canada. And every year, our water is put at risk – for drinking, for fish and other wildlife. Our famous beaches, our water infrastructure, and more, is also put at risk,” OBWB Chair Sue McKortoff said, explaining the importance of the letter.

Although there are no known infestations of Zebra or Quagga mussels in B.C. or Western Canada, an introduction would have devastating and costly impacts to water quality, fish populations and habitat, water utilities, hydro-electric facilities, beaches, and property values. The cost of managing an infestation is conservatively estimated to be \$42M per year in the Okanagan valley alone; costs that would be borne by local taxpayers and property owners.

Shuswap and Okanagan Lakes are especially at risk of an invasion because they see a large influx of watercraft each summer, including from mussel-infested areas of North America. Additionally, federal research has noted that the Okanagan and Shuswap is at high risk due to warm water temperatures and high calcium content in the waters which increases the chance of the mussels’ survival.

The letter cites a spring 2019 report on Aquatic Invasive Species by the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development which identifies a lack of urgency and intervention by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) in preventing and containing the mussels. More recently, a report from the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans in June 2019 also found that the federal government’s protection of Canadian lakes and waterways against aquatic invasive species is inadequate. An infestation in B.C., the letter states, would cause a catastrophic collapse of Pacific salmon stocks in our waters, which should be a concern to DFO.

“We are very concerned that Zebra or Quagga Mussels could arrive in British Columbia,” says Paul Demenok, Chair of the Shuswap Watershed Council. “We know from the experience of others who are now dealing with the invasive mussels, that the cost of effective prevention is so much smaller than what it costs to manage the



mussels once they arrive. We are lucky. We still have the opportunity to keep them out, but we need stronger support from the federal government on this issue.”

The SWC and OBWB are asking the federal government to build upon a previous financial commitment of \$400,000 in August 2018. Specifically, they are asking for a new investment in B.C. that could support the expansion of three key programs including watercraft inspection, early detection monitoring, and education and outreach. The SWC and OBWB are also asking the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans to contain known mussel infestations by enforcing new prevention measures, such as watercraft inspection and decontamination for travellers leaving infested watersheds, and new measures to prevent floatplanes and amphibious watercraft from transporting aquatic invasive species.

“The nearest known Zebra and Quagga Mussels to B.C., within Canada, are in Manitoba and Ontario,” says Erin Vieira, program manager for the Shuswap Watershed Council. “Although it is illegal to possess or transport aquatic invasive species, there is no requirement for watercraft to be inspected and decontaminated as they leave infested lakes or waterways. This is an opportunity to improve containment and prevent the spread of these mussels.”

“We take this issue seriously and are heavily invested in protecting our waters,” added McKortoff. “For its part, OBWB has run its *‘Don’t Move A Mussel’* outreach and education campaign since 2012, spending more than \$334,000 in local tax dollars on this initiative, and thanks to support from the Okanagan business community, delivered a program worth over \$847,000. It has also provided \$195,000 in local tax dollars between 2013 and 2019 to the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society to assist with direct boater outreach and to conduct mussel monitoring. But we need the federal government to join us. We welcome the opportunity to work with Minister Jordan, and her office, to address this issue. ”

The full letter can be found on the SWC website at www.shuswapwater.ca.

For more information on the mussels, the risks that they pose, and tips to prevent their spread, visit www.DontMoveAMussel.ca.

-30-

Editor: the full letter to Minister Jordan is attached to this news release.

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