

Honourable Randene Neill
B.C. Minister of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship
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February 05, 2025

Re: Funding and inter-provincial cooperation to prevent invasive mussels

Dear Minister Neill,

Congratulations on your appointment as Minister of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship. The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) looks forward to working with you on water-related issues in our region, which includes 12 municipalities, three regional districts, five First Nations, and over 350,000 people.

One of the most urgent issues we face across the province is preventing the spread of aquatic invasive species, particularly invasive mussels. The B.C. Invasive Mussel Defence Program (IMDP) has been underfunded and understaffed for years, despite being critical to protecting B.C.'s economy and freshwater ecosystems. Without this program, invasive mussels would cause significant damage to ecosystems, fisheries, and drinking water systems, costing the province hundreds of millions annually.

We are especially concerned about the discovery of golden mussels in California, which can survive in calcium-poor waters, posing a new risk to all regions of B.C. The threat has never been greater, but the preventative actions remain the same: a fully funded, resourced IMDP and mandatory inspections for all watercraft entering the province.

Urgent Actions Needed:

1. Immediate Funding for IMDP – \$5.5 million

Since the program's launch in 2015, IMDP funding has not kept pace with inflation. Between 2019-2023, the budget was reduced by 25% (when accounting for inflation), leading to a 60% drop in watercraft inspections. With invasive mussels now detected in neighboring Idaho, we urge you to allocate at least \$5.5 million to the IMDP in 2025 to restore inspections and enhance prevention efforts.

2. Mandatory Inspections for All Watercraft

Currently, only boats passing an open IMDP station are required to be inspected, leaving many watercraft uninspected. We propose making inspections mandatory for all watercraft entering B.C., which could be implemented through public-private partnerships with marinas. This would help fund the program, reduce enforcement costs, and encourage responsible boating culture. Legislation to support this could include:

- **Wildlife Act (RSBC 1996, c. 488)** – Governs the protection of ecosystems and invasive species.
- **Invasive Species Regulation (under the Wildlife Act)** – Addresses the control of invasive species.
- **Water Sustainability Act (SBC 2014, c. 15)** – Protects water resources and could include regulations for Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) prevention.
- **Public Health Act (RSBC 2008, c. 28)** – Addresses public health risks related to AIS.
- **Drinking Water Protection Act (SBC 2001, c. 9)** – Could regulate inspections near vulnerable drinking water sources.

We are available to help with detailed proposals for the implementation of mandatory inspections.

3. Federal Action

We urge you to call on the federal government for resources to support IMDP. Federal funding has been limited to detection, not prevention. As we've seen in Lake Winnipeg and other regions, once invasive species are detected, it's already too late. The federal government must prioritize prevention to halt the spread of invasive mussels before they enter B.C.

4. Western Canada Invasive Mussel-Free Zone

We recommend creating a "Western Canada Invasive Mussel-Free Zone," including B.C., Alberta, and potentially Saskatchewan. This would enable consistent inspections, common policies, and penalties across provincial borders. Alberta's recently created AIS Task Force – chaired by MLA Grant Hunter, released a recommendations report in December 2024 which outlines specific actions and timelines for implementing a watercraft sticker program and mandatory inspections for all watercraft entering Alberta from the east and south. We recommend B.C. create a similar, politically led task force to work with Alberta to align and coordinate efforts.

5. Align Penalties Across Provinces

We urge B.C. to match Alberta's high fines for non-compliance. The larger watercraft that pose the highest risk of transporting invasive mussels should be subject to higher fines. Alberta's fines, such as \$4,200 for failing to stop at an inspection station, set an important precedent for effective deterrence.

6. Create Clear Policy to Limit Chemical Use as a "Rapid Response"

Many jurisdictions including B.C. and Alberta are calling for the registration of additional chemical options for responding to new mussel detections. While it is important to have tools available, case after case shows these chemicals fail to eradicate mussels, cost millions to use, damage the ecosystem and kill other non-target species including salmonids and other fish. Rapid response chemicals should never be used as a PR cover for inadequate and underfunded prevention efforts.

Public Support

In March 2024, OBWB convened the Okanagan-Interior Invasive Mussel Working Group, attended by more than 100 people representing 58 local governments, First Nations, marinas and yacht clubs, businesses, tourism associations, chambers of commerce, invasive species and conservation groups and other organizations. This level of participation shows the seriousness of the issue, and that you have the public support, local political support, and social licence to protect provincial waters from this significant threat.

OBWB will continue to provide advice and support within our mandate, and we look forward to increased collaboration and continued leadership from the government on this vital issue.



Blair Ireland, Chair
Okanagan Basin Water Board

CC:

- Okanagan MLAs: Donegal Wilson, Kristina Loewen, Tara Armstrong, Gavin Dew, Amelia Boulton, David Williams, Harwinder Sandhu, Macklin McCall
- Okanagan Nation Alliance, Chiefs Executive Council and Natural Resources Council
- Okanagan Indian Band
- Westbank First Nation
- Penticton Indian Band
- Osoyoos Indian Band
- Lower Similkameen Indian Band
- 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
- BC Wildlife Federation, Jesse Zeman, Executive Director
- 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
- Okanagan-Interior Invasive Mussel Working Group members