

Okanagan Local Government Boards and Councils

April 25, 2019

Re: Reducing conflict between native mussel protection and invasive milfoil control in the Okanagan

Dear Mayors, Chairs, Councillors and Directors,

Since the 1970s, the Okanagan Basin Water Board has run a program to remove invasive Eurasian watermilfoil from the five large lakes in the Okanagan (Okanagan, Kalamalka Wood, Skaha and Osoyoos). Most public beaches throughout the valley are free of invasive weeds due to this program. However, recent changes in provincial and federal regulations are increasingly affecting our most effective treatment method, rototilling in the winter. Rototilling de-roots milfoil from the lake bottom, reducing stem densities by 80-97% in a single treatment. Rototilling is now prohibited in several areas under provincial regulations.

This recent rototilling prohibition is due to federal and provincial government staff efforts to protect a species of freshwater mussel known as the Rocky Mountain Ridged Mussel (RMRM). These mussels range from southern California, East to Nevada and throughout the Pacific Northwest, but in Canada they are limited to the Okanagan Basin, which represents only 5% of their total population range. Prior to 2003 there had been only 14 occurrences of the RMRM recorded in the Okanagan, and the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) recommended that they be listed as “Endangered” under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). However, more recent surveys have found healthy populations with successful reproduction rates in several areas throughout the valley. One study in 2015 counted more than 5,500 RMRM in just nine surveyed sites, and estimated the total population at those sites to be more than 13,000. COSEWIC has not re-assessed their recommendation since 2010, and has not accounted for this new information. Further, November 2011 was the last time that Canada’s Department of Fisheries and Oceans conducted public consultations on the recommendation to list RMRM as endangered under SARA.

Milfoil rototilling is now prohibited in any areas where RMRM are found based on an assumption that this weed control method could cause harm to RMRM. However, there is evidence to suggest that allowing milfoil to grow will create conditions which are unsuitable for RMRM, while also creating poor water quality, poor habitat for other species, as well as social and economic harm.

The OBWB has sent a detailed letter (enclosed) to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and to the B.C. Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development asking them to grant an authorization under the federal Fisheries Act for the milfoil control program to continue. We strongly believe that a more evidence-based and balanced approach is needed before prohibiting milfoil de-rooting and allowing this invasive weed to thrive in our lakes. We have also provided a detailed response to the recommendation to list RMRM as endangered under SARA, asking for a new round of consultations, and for COSEWIC to re-assess their recommendation based on current information. That response is included in the letter at appendix C.

We request that your local government consider providing a letter of support for our request to the ministers, authorizing the OBWB milfoil de-rooting program to continue.

We have provided extensive information in the letter to the ministers including:

- Decision sought
- History
- Concerns
- Effects of invasive Eurasian watermilfoil (Appendix A): Environmental, Social and Economic
- Methods of Milfoil Control (Appendix B)
- Comments Regarding Canada Gazette, Part 1, Volume 153, Number 12: Order Amending Schedule 1 to the Species at Risk Act.

We hope this information will address any questions or concerns you have about this issue and allow you to support us as we continue to battle this harmful invasive species in our local waters.

Sincerely,



Anna Warwick Sears, Executive Director
Okanagan Basin Water Board