

TIME FOR GOVERNMENT TO FLEX ITS MUSSELS TO PROTECT OUR FRESH WATERWAYS (2024)

Issue

Invasive mussels, which have devastating effects on hydroelectric power, fishing, and tourism – have been detected in the Columbia River Basin in the U.S., an eleven-hour drive for a boat trailer from the Canada/U.S. border. This poses an imminent threat to fresh waters in British Columbia. The Provincial Government must take decisive action now to avoid irreversible damage to our water-based infrastructure and tourism industries. Efforts begun in 2016 by the provincial and Federal Governments to detect the spread are flagging and must be restarted.

Background

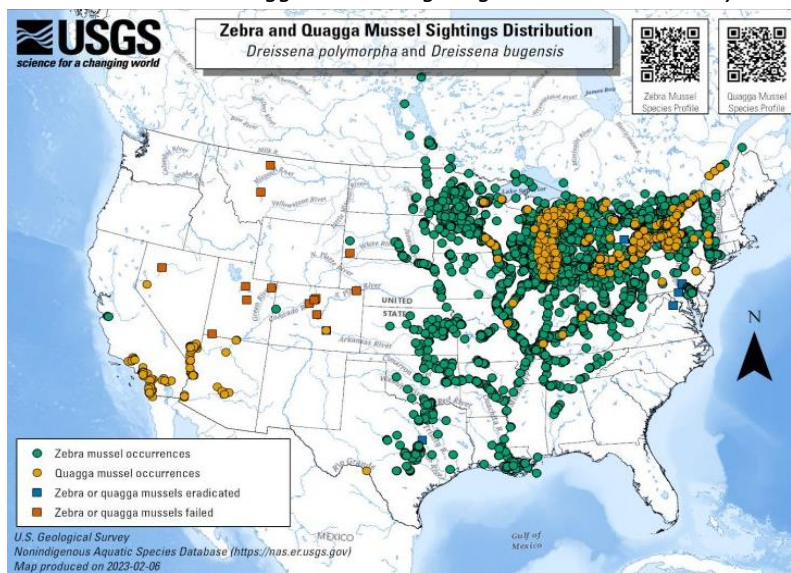
Despite the BC Chamber of Commerce and other groups calling attention to the economic threat posed by invasive mussel species, the Provincial and Federal Governments aren't taking the steps needed to prevent the spread of this scourge.

Note the difference between “detection” and “identification”. When the province talks about “early detection,” they mean finding an infestation already in a water body. When they say rapid response, they mean quarantining an infested water body, and potentially using chemicals or other means to attempt to control or eradicate them. Identification means finding mussels on a boat, floatplane, or other surface (pipes, infrastructure).

One immediate step is introducing a temporary moratorium on out-of-province watercraft entering BC until previous funding is restored (\$4M/2018) and the treatment results of invasive mussels found in Idaho (Snake River) are assessed. Funding cuts by the Federal Government have been echoed by the Provincial Government. FortisBC and BC Hydro appear to be using those cuts as tacit approval for cutting their funding.

If mussels are established in BC's fresh waters, infrastructure costs will skyrocket, tax increases will follow, and tourism centred around beach use, boating, and swimming will dry up, causing economic devastation throughout the southern areas of the province.

Chart 1 – Zebra & Quagga Mussels Sightings Distribution February 2023



Source: U.S. Geological Survey

The Threat Defined

Quagga and zebra mussels, native to Eastern Europe and Western Asia, pose a serious and costly threat to aquatic ecosystems, salmon populations, tourist destinations, hydro power stations, and other infrastructure facilities. They came in on commercial ocean vessels.

Until 2023, the Columbia River Basin, including the Snake River, was the last major river system in the U.S. that remained free of this invasive pest.

Responding to the Threat

- A test kill was conducted in the fall of 2023 in the Snake River in Idaho. Results are not yet known, and whether killing in a river with pesticides, if it does work, likely could not be replicated in a large body of lake water, it would provide promise.¹
- Identification (while boats are in transit on roadways) and decontamination are the only tools currently known to work.
- The Provincial Government requires the authority to immediately implement “Pull the plug” on bilgewater and ballast tank regulations², thus stranding and drying out the mussels' larvae and preventing contamination of the next waterway where the boat is launched. BC is the last remaining western province without pull-the-plug legislation in place. Most northwestern U.S. states require drain plugs to be pulled before transport on roadways.³
- 24-hour, seven-day, 365 days a year checking stations must be established or re-established at all BC borders. Provincial funding in the range of \$4M had previously been allocated to the program – more was needed – and now even this was cut as of 2023. Federal Government support through Canadian Border Security Services is required.
- Business groups and tourism associations such as the Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association called for a temporary moratorium on incoming out-of-province boat traffic until funding for 24/7/365 detection is restored, or such time as the test kill is proven plausible for all bodies of fresh water in BC.⁴ Their support is crucial.
- Indigenous Nations throughout BC are focused on the conversations with the province and must continue to be involved in solution-based recommendations.⁵
- The province’s *Early Detection and Rapid Response* plan must be updated.
- The Provincial and Federal Governments need to undertake and publish a planning process to create long-term response, containment, and control.
- Vulnerability assessments can be conducted by utilities, local jurisdictions, and private entities.

¹ Invasive quagga mussels in Snake River trigger rapid response. John Johnson, October 3, 2023.

<https://www.idahoconservation.org/blog/invasive-quagga-mussels-in-snake-river-trigger-rapid-response/>

² Note that the Province of BC has an internal analysis suggesting that regulations couldn’t be implemented under the current Wildlife Act.

³ Alberta: Fisheries Act Regulation 220/1997/2016. <https://www.canlii.org/en/ab/laws/regu/alta-reg-220-1997/latest/alta-reg-220-1997.html#sec6.1> Saskatchewan: The Fisheries Regulations 88.6 2018 <https://pubsaskdev.blob.core.windows.net/pubsask-prod/1869/F16-1r1.pdf> Manitoba: The Water Protection Act AIS Regulation 2015 https://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/reg/current/_pdf-reg.php?reg=173/2015 Ontario Invasive Species Act Regulations 2022 <https://ero.ontario.ca/notice/019-3465> Western States Conveyance Drainage Requirements 2016 <https://nsglc.olemiss.edu/projects/model-legal-framework/files/drainage-reqs.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.castanet.net/news/Kelowna/472192/Kelowna-Chamber-wants-moratorium-on-out-of-province-boats-entering-B-C#472192>; <https://infotel.ca/newsitem/chambers-of-commerce-in-kamloops-okanagan-demand-ban-on-out-of-province-boats/it103208>; <https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/canada/okanagan-chambers-of-commerce-call-for-ban-on-out-of-province-boats/ar-BB1f3cu?ocid=msedgntp&pc=HCTS&cvid=af14468c86544ec2820b19e045e4025f&ei=13>

⁵ Oral report at the Okanagan Interior Invasive Mussels Working Group, March 8, 2024 Workshop hosted by the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

Without action, the province will suffer billions of dollars in remediation costs in an environment of suddenly dropping tourism. Mussels' unwelcome presence is permanent. The damage they cause is perpetual.

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS

That the Provincial Government:

1. Until sufficient funding is restored for effective mussel inspection and treatment, introduce a temporary moratorium on out-of-province watercraft entering BC.
2. Elevate the May 17, 2024, "pull-the-plug" (on Bilgewater) recommendation to a regulation to be in effect immediately.
3. Ask Canada's Minister for Public Safety to issue direction for all watercraft entering Canada at all border crossings to be inspected prior to allowing entry.
4. Commit restored funding to the provincial Invasive Mussel Defence Program of no less than \$4 million per year to include work with local municipalities & districts and Indigenous Nations.