

Guest opinion: The zebra and quagga mussel threat to the Pacific Northwest can be avoided with a reasonable investment in prevention

By Matt Morrison and Randy Fisher

The Columbia River is the lifeblood of the Pacific Northwest. It powers our homes and businesses, turns our deserts into farms that feed the world, and it's a recreational magnet for everyone.

This crucial resource faces well-known threats like pollution and over-allocation. Most are difficult and expensive to address at the scale necessary to solve the problem, but there is a big threat that is manageable, even preventable, if we act together soon. The threat of aquatic invasive species, especially zebra and quagga mussels, originally brought to the U.S. in the ballast water of large ships from Eastern Europe, can be avoided with a reasonable investment in prevention.

Though only about the size of a fingernail, they can grow until they've engulfed the underwater infrastructure of dams and freshwater systems. Filtering plankton from the water, they compete with juvenile salmon and other native species for food critical to their growth and survival. An infestation could wreak enormous economic and environmental havoc, costing utilities, irrigators, navigators, hatchery operators, and recreational water users tens of millions of dollars annually, forever. Because once established, their eradication is impossible. For example, since 2007 quagga mussels have spread throughout the lower Colorado River system, where Hoover Dam, irrigation and large municipal water systems have been encrusted.

The states of Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Oregon, and the province of British Columbia, are fighting to protect their waters from quagga and zebra mussels. Collectively, they inspected more than 100,000 boats in 2012, intercepting over 100 that were mussel-infested. Unfortunately, state inspection stations are underfunded, understaffed, and often lack formal partnership agreements. Individual states cannot win this battle on their own. We need a coordinated, multi-state system designed to prevent these aquatic invaders from gaining a foothold in our watersheds. A strong perimeter with inspection and decontamination stations at all major highways entering the region, combined with a quick and reliable system for sharing inspection information between states and provinces is necessary for us to successfully prevent their introduction.

Idaho already has a strong system in place that includes a paper passport that helps educate boaters and ease the movement of local, low-risk boaters through inspection stations. A real-time data sharing system helps inspectors track the inspection history of a vessel within the state.

This past summer, a number of quagga mussel-fouled barges from Lake Mead almost made it to their destinations in Lake Washington and Astoria. Thanks to inspectors in Idaho and Oregon, and personal coordination between staff in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, they were intercepted and decontaminated. But we can't rely on informal communication as a safeguard.

Forming a strategic perimeter of watercraft inspection and decontamination stations open 24/7 with a data sharing system is essential for preventing an infestation. We were saved last summer by the states'

diligence. Now is the time to take regional action to ensure that the Columbia River Basin remains one of the last regions in North America free from this ecological and economic disaster.

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