

Portland Sticks Out Its Neck to Study Turtle's Outlook

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The Port of Portland has a turtle problem. Or maybe it doesn't. Whatever, it's going to spend \$145,000 to find out once and for all.

The port's 3,000-acre Rivergate Industrial District, home to four deep-water shipping terminals, includes a couple of lakes populated by the western painted turtle. The turtle isn't listed as endangered or threatened. And though local environmentalists have no evidence that its health or numbers are declining and aren't even sure how many turtles live in the lakes, they reckon the species just might be in harm's way.

The port's position is, why take chances? So it is launching a survey, at a cost of about \$115,000. It also has agreed to contribute \$30,000 toward another \$115,000 turtle study by Metro, the regional government for three Portland-area counties.

'Sensitive' Turtle

Environmentalists view the western painted turtle as a "sensitive species," whose well-being "is an indicator of the health of that ecosystem," says Mike Houck, an urban naturalist for the Audubon Society of Portland. To thrive, the turtle needs plentiful amounts of clean water and grasslands for nesting—which might be threatened by the operations of the 60 companies doing business in the Rivergate Industrial District.

Mr. Houck says that railroad lines in the district pass precariously close to the turtle's nesting areas, and that the vibrations of truck traffic and heavy industry also put the reptile at risk. Overall, concerns over the turtle's fate have recently risen to "a new level," he says.

In fact, concern over the turtle has helped rally more than 100 volunteers in the past six weeks to assist with the turtle study. Volunteers are undergoing training now in preparation for next month, when the turtles begin emerging from hibernation.

Tracking Reptiles

Broken up into small teams under the leadership of a wildlife scientist, the part-time naturalists will count turtles, monitor nesting sites, analyze hibernation patterns and even track some of the reptiles with tiny radio devices attached to their shells, says Lupine Jones, who is organizing the volunteers for Metro.

The insults to the turtle's environment have a cumulative effect, says Teresa DeLorenzo, a scientist with the Northwest Ecological Research Institute, which is conducting the Metro turtle study. Industry isn't only to blame, she notes. Populations of raccoons, bullfrogs and other predators are on the rise, and from the perspective of a turtle, Ms. DeLorenzo says,

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