

Lawmakers press for heat aid

Rising prices will leave many Vermonters out in the cold

By Erin Kelly
Free Press Washington Writer

WASHINGTON — Karla Rowell lies awake at night in her northern Vermont mobile home and worries about how she'll pay the rapidly rising cost of home heating oil to keep herself and her 16-year-old daughter warm this winter.

"I'm scared," said Rowell, 45, of Hardwick, who is legally blind and on disability. "We had several weeks of 30-below-zero temperatures last winter. I feel like I'm not prepared for the cold. I keep hear-

ing scary things about how much the price of heating oil is going to go up."

According to a report released Sept. 7 by the Department of Energy's Energy Information Administration, prices for winter fuel oil, propane and natural gas will be 218 percent higher this year than they were in 2001 and more than 30 percent higher than last winter. The price increase was driven in part by damage to U.S. oil refineries by Hurricane Katrina, which exacerbated the already high price of fuel.

Although oil refineries on the Gulf Coast were mostly spared from Hurricane Rita, lawmakers in the Northeast and Midwest fear their constituents could soon be hurricane victims. Nearly 60 percent of Vermont homes use heating oil.

"While \$3-a-gallon gasoline is a family budget breaker, \$3-a-gallon heating oil is a life-or-death matter," said Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt.

Jeffords, Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.,

See HEAT, 4A

Fuel assistance

The state Fuel Assistance Program is administered by the Economic Services Division of the Department for Children and Families. It is funded entirely by federal dollars through Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LI-HEAP).

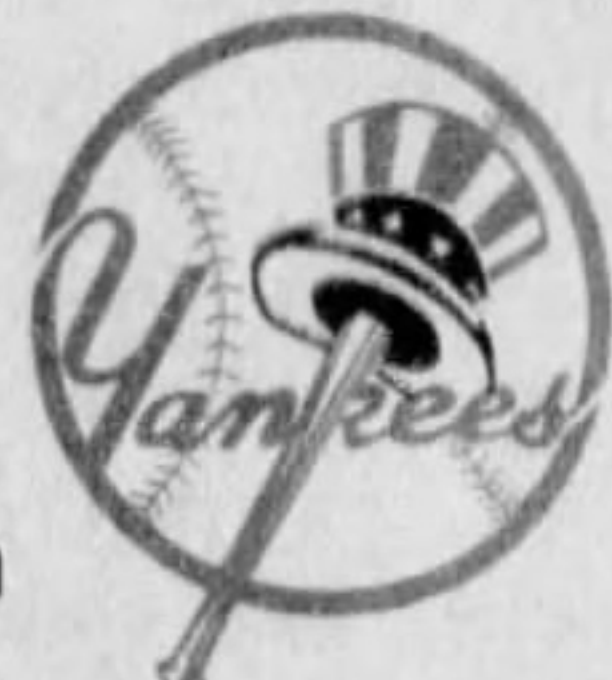
To apply for fuel assistance, call (800) 479-6151 or 241-1165 or go to http://www.dsw.state.vt.us/Programs_Pages/Fuel/fuel.shtml



Race for the pennant

Sox, Yankees dead even with seven games to go

SPORTS, 5B-7B



MATT ROURKE, American-Statesman

National Guard Spec. Jon Eric Miletello consoles his grandmother, Bell Vaughn, Sunday in Erath, La., the day after Hurricane Rita passed through the area. Vaughn's home was flooded, and she was evacuated with her four dogs.

Is politics driving bay science?

■ A medium-sized turtle may be a jumbo-sized obstacle to Douglas administration plans to remove the Missisquoi Bay causeway.

By Candace Page
Free Press Staff Writer

Gov. Jim Douglas won wild applause in a corner of northwestern Vermont last month when his officials announced plans to remove the Missisquoi Bay causeway, a rock barrier that residents blame in part for the bay's soupy green water.

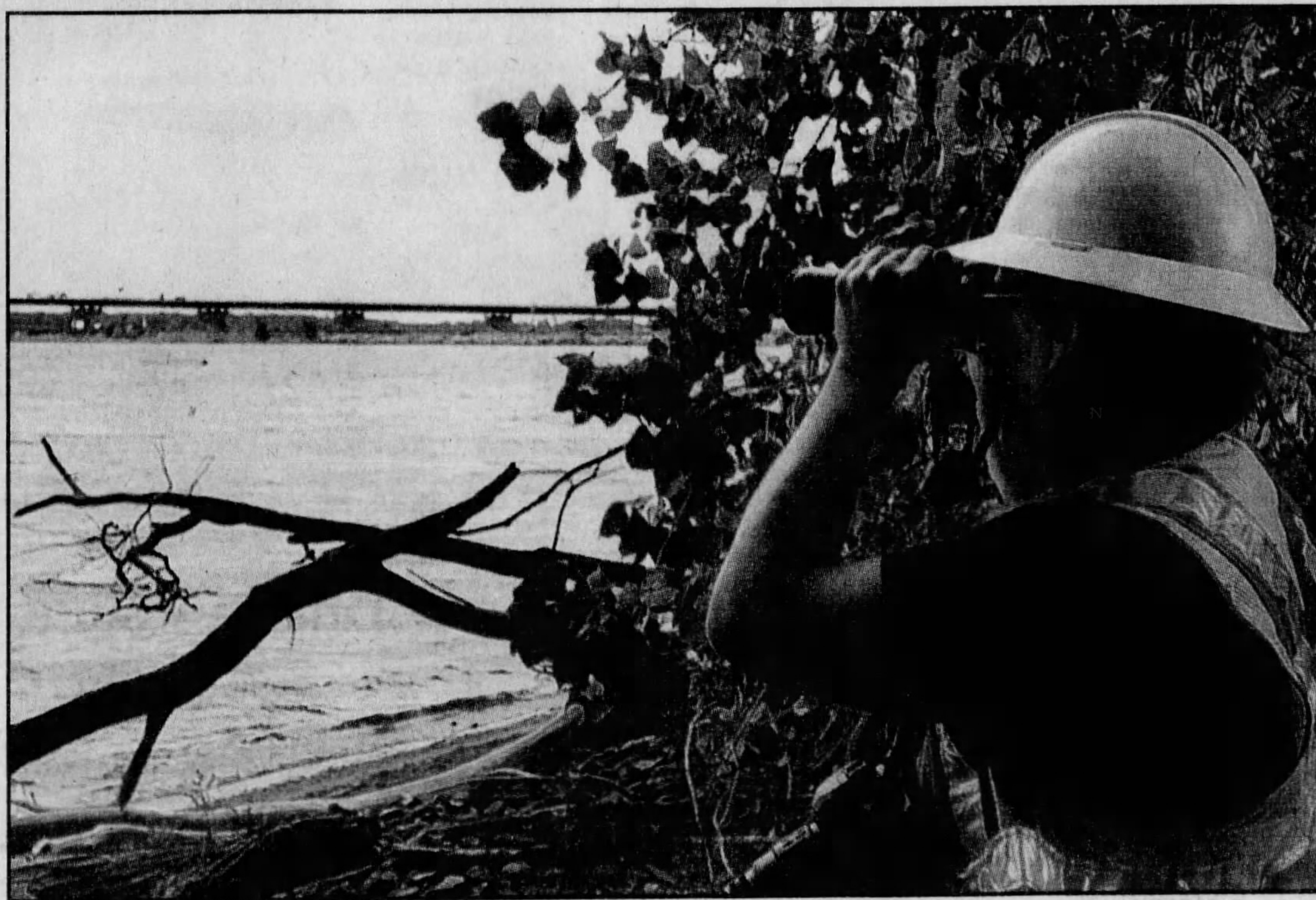
Now, the administration is taking steps to clear a potential obstacle to its removal plan: The Fish and Wildlife Department is challenging scientists' conclusion that the causeway should be left in place to protect a leathery, long-nosed turtle on Vermont's threatened species list.

The budding disagreement between the Fish and Wildlife Department and outside scientists has some of the scientists asking whether politics, not science, is driving the state's assessment of the Eastern spiny softshell turtle's needs.

"I certainly think that is what is happening," said C. William Kilpatrick, a University of Vermont biology professor and a member of the state advisory committee on endangered reptiles and amphibians. "It's a real problem."

Fish and Wildlife Commissioner Wayne Laroche, who has offered new theories challenging the importance of the causeway to the turtles' survival, brushed off that criticism. He said he is insisting on more scientific rigor, not less, and criti-

See TURTLE, 4A



PETER HUOPPI, Free Press

Ron Haskell of Alburg observes turtles perched on platforms in Missisquoi Bay north of the Vermont 78 causeway between Swanton and Alburg on Thursday. Haskell saw two map turtles and one Eastern spiny softshell turtle on a pair of floating platforms near the Alburg shore.

The spiny softshell turtle

■ **NAME:** Eastern spiny softshell turtle, *Apalone spinifer spinifera*

■ **APPEARANCE:** Leathery, olive-gray shell; three-clawed web-foot; tubular snout



Photo courtesy of Lawrence Pyne

■ **HOME:** Lakes, rivers from Midwest to Vermont

■ **STATUS:** Threatened in Vermont and Quebec

■ **SIZE:** In Vermont, females range up to 16 inches and 11 pounds. Males are much smaller, up to 7 inches and 1 pound

■ **LIFE CYCLE:** Hatch from eggs laid on gravel/sand beaches. Hibernate for six months each year. Can live for up to 50 years. Eggs and young turtles are subject to heavy predation by raccoons, skunks, snakes, wading birds and other animals.

"For good or bad, the turtles have come to use the causeway. Our fear is removing it could knock back the population to the point they won't recover."

Steve Faccio,
Vermont Institute of Natural Science

Monitors confirm IRA's full disarmament

By Mary Jordan and Kevin Sullivan
The Washington Post

LONDON — The Irish Republican Army has scrapped its vast arsenal of guns and explosives in a landmark step toward ending more than three decades of political and religious violence in Northern Ireland, according to a source close to the independent weapons inspection commission that witnessed the disarmament process.

The weapons inspectors will report their findings today

to the British and Irish governments, said the official, who insisted on anonymity because of the sensitivity of the case. The disarmament, which the IRA promised in a statement in July, was also confirmed by Martin McGuinness, a senior member of Sinn Féin, the IRA's political wing.

"The IRA's decision on July 28th to formally end its armed campaign has changed the political landscape in Ireland forever," McGuinness said in a statement issued Sunday night. "I am confident that tomorrow

will bring the final chapter on the issue of IRA arms. I believe that Ireland stands on the cusp of a truly historic advance, and I hope that people across the island will respond positively in the time ahead."

The disarmament announcement, scheduled to be made at a news conference today by John de Chastelain, a retired Canadian general who heads the weapons inspection commission, would be a historic breakthrough in the conflict between majority Protestants and minority Catholics

that has killed more than 3,600 people since 1969. The British and Irish governments hailed as momentous the IRA's July announcement that it would disarm, but any announcement of an IRA disarmament is unlikely to completely convince the province's majority Protestant community that peace is at hand.

The Protestant side has cited the IRA's failure to disarm as the main obstacle to full implementation of the landmark 1998 Good Friday peace accords.



PETER MORRISON, The Associated Press

A father and son pass the Irish News offices in Belfast, Northern Ireland, on Sunday. It was announced Sunday that the Irish Republican Army had destroyed all its weapons.

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Vol. 178, No. 269

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TURTLE: Battle brews over causeway science

Continued from Page 1A
cized earlier conclusions about the turtles as unsupported by data.

"I always approach things with a can-do attitude, but I can't violate my basis in science. Lies won't cut it in science," the former wildlife researcher said.

Laroche and some of his outside science advisers disagree on whether new data disprove earlier theories that the causeway is necessary winter habitat for the turtles. They also are at odds over Laroche's theory that removing the causeway is important to eliminate a barrier to the turtles' movements and to allow the lake's natural currents to create new nesting beaches.

Biologists outside state government said they want to hear Laroche back up his ideas.

"I wish he had started a dialogue with scientists before going public with his theories," said James Andrews, a Middlebury College biologist and chairman of the reptile-and-amphibian committee. "There is some evidence, under the current administration, that it is 'policy first, science second.'"

Public wants causeway gone

This story of politics and science begins with 3,500 feet of rocky causeway and a bevy of fast-swimming olive-green turtles.

The causeway carries Vermont 78 across a neck of Lake Champlain between Swanton and Alburg at the mouth of Missisquoi Bay.

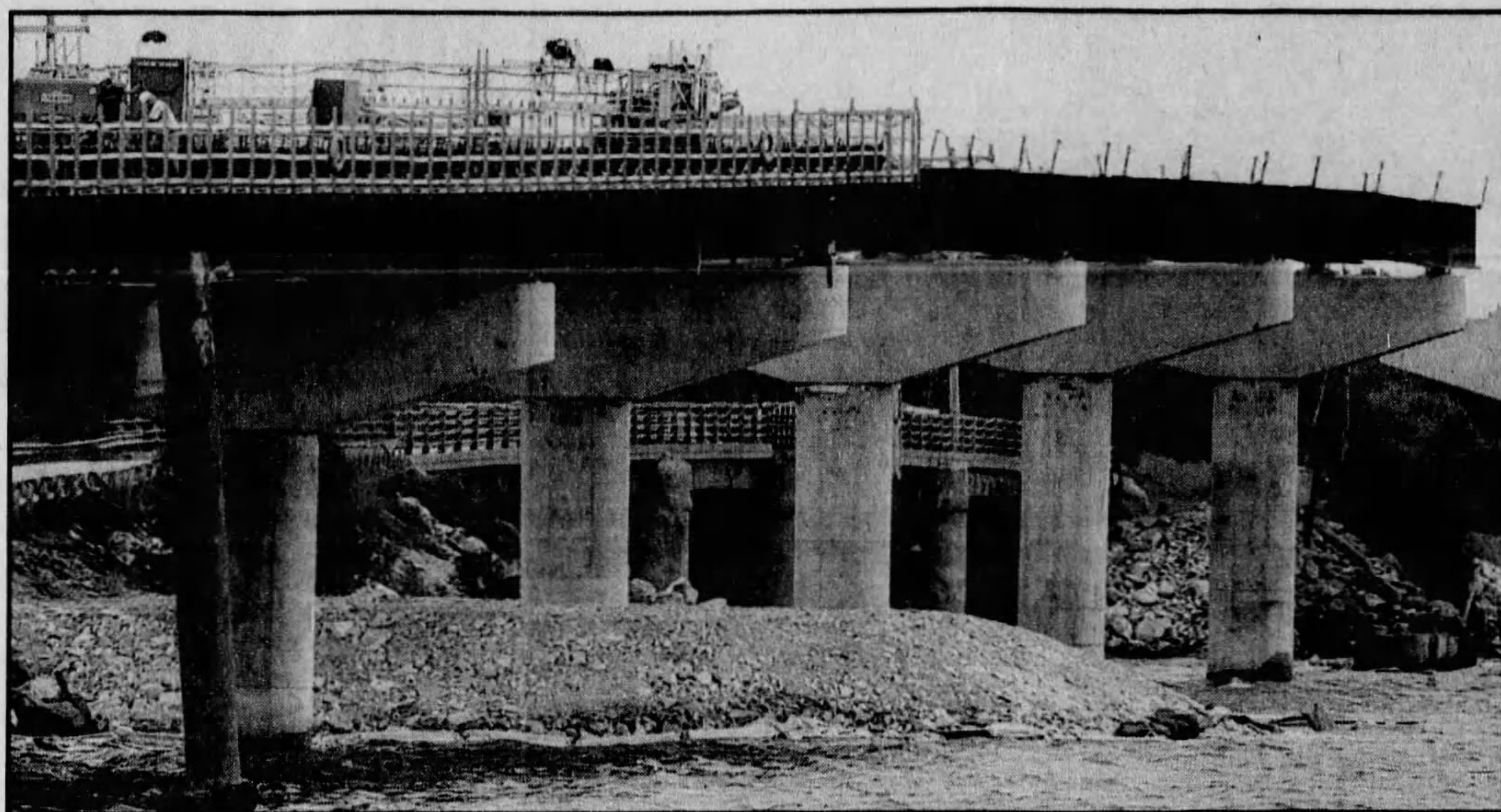
The turtles live in Missisquoi Bay and its tributary rivers, but gather in the largest numbers on the rocky causeway, perhaps because former haunts have been lost to shoreline development. At the causeway, turtles forage for food, bask in the sun and burrow near its base for the winter.

Both Missisquoi Bay and the turtle are under stress.

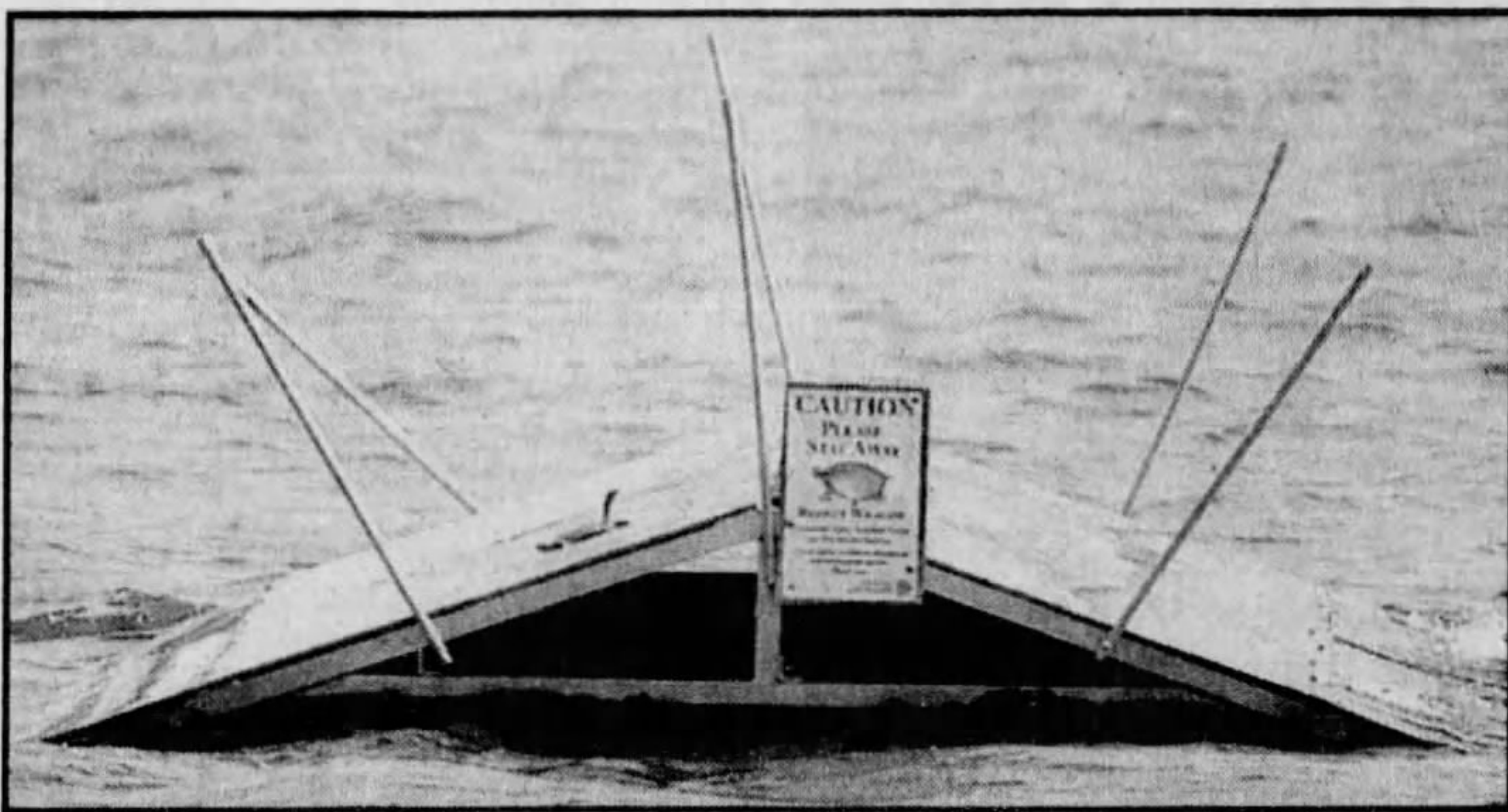
Phosphorus pollution turns the bay soupy green in the summer, making the water unusable at times. That has left shoreline residents distraught and seeking ways to fix the problem.

Quebec and Vermont, which share the bay, have put the turtles on their list of threatened species. No other population exists in Quebec, and Vermont has only one other group — on the Lamoille River.

A new Missisquoi Bay Bridge will open for traffic in 2006 or 2007. The old cause-



A man-made basking area for turtles is being built beneath the new bridge across Missisquoi Bay between Swanton and Alburg.



An Eastern spiny softshell turtle sits on a floating platform north of the Vermont 78 causeway that stretches across Missisquoi Bay between Swanton and Alburg on Thursday.

way will be abandoned. Residents have been lobbying for more than a decade to have it removed then, convinced that it restricts water circulation, traps pollutants in the bay and thus is partly to blame for poor water quality in summer.

Several studies have found otherwise. The most recent state analysis concluded that removing the causeway would improve water quality by only 1 percent.

Ron Haskell, an Alburg resident, reflects a view that can be heard at any local gathering: "I get my water from the bay, so even if there is only a 1 percent increase in water quality, for me that is enough."

Political pressure increased this year when a U.S.-Canadian group weighed in.

Anger over the causeway diverts residents' energy from solving the bay's real pollution problems — justification enough for removing it, the International Joint Commission concluded.

In August, the Douglas administration responded. The Fish and Wildlife Department announced it would begin steps to remove the Missisquoi Bay causeway and a second one just to the south at Carry Bay.

Removing the causeway, Laroche announced, would get rid of a manmade barrier that fragments fish habitat, interrupts natural water circulation and has caused erosion of beaches where turtles might nest. Spiny turtles, he said, would benefit from removing the causeway.

Laroche steps in

Laroche's conclusion reverses the department's previous findings about the turtle's dependence on the causeway.

It also appears to provide a rationale that is essential if the Douglas administration is going to succeed in its plans.

"As far as what has surfaced so far, the turtles are the biggest potential roadblock," Laroche said last week. His theories would clear away that roadblock to removing the causeway.

An endangered-species permit already in place for the new bay bridge forbids the state to remove more than 330 feet of the old causeway, because it provides needed habitat for the turtle. That permit would have to be amended or replaced with one that downgrades the causeway's importance for the turtle.

Laroche also has on his

desk a draft "species recovery plan" endorsed 14 months ago by the state Endangered Species Committee, which repeatedly identifies the causeway as key habitat for the turtle. He said last week he is personally making changes in the draft, which did not meet his standards. He said the new version probably will reflect his theories about how to help the turtle.

In interviews, Laroche laid out theories that amounted to a frontal assault on previous findings about the Eastern spiny softshell turtle.

■ He noted the lack of reliable population estimates. It is even possible, Laroche said, there are so many turtles that they do not need to be on the threatened-species list.

■ He also noted that a number of turtles that previously wintered on the causeway moved away in 2004-05, presumably to avoid construction work on the new bridge. "They went somewhere and survived. That nullifies the hypothesis that the causeway is essential habitat," he said.

■ Taking out the causeway would increase nesting habitat for the turtles, he said, because lake currents would rebuild beaches that have been eroded since the causeway was installed 68 years ago.

■ Water moves so fast through the causeway opening that it might keep the turtles from passing through. "Is the real reason that they are using the causeway that they can't get through it?" he said.

Weighing risks, benefits

In general, scientists and others outside government agree with Laroche that it is a worthy goal to restore Lake Champlain's natural state by removing manmade barriers like the causeway.

"In any other situation, we would all love to see the causeway out of there," said Steve Faccio, a biologist at the Vermont Institute of Natural Science and a member of the reptile and amphibians scientific advisory committee to the state Endangered Species Committee.

The trouble, he and others said, is the spiny turtle.

"For good or bad, the turtles have come to use the causeway. Our fear is removing it could knock back the population to the point they won't recover," he said.

Laroche presented his new theories to the reptile-and-amphibians committee in August. His ideas were greeted with skepticism, committee chairman Andrews said.

Several scientists at the meeting said one year's data are not enough to conclude the turtles could safely winter elsewhere if the causeway were gone. Sheer survival is not enough. Were the turtles too weakened to mate and nest? Were they able to find mates when they emerged from solitary hibernation?

They also questioned Laroche's theory that the causeway is a barrier to the turtles' movement.

Patrick Galois, a Quebec researcher who has studied the turtles for a decade, said, "They are moving through that opening in the causeway. It is not always a strong current and, in any case, they move along the shoreline where it is not so strong."

While the scientists applauded Laroche's efforts to improve turtle-nesting habitat on a nearby state-owned beach, they said his desire to rebuild beaches by removing the causeway does not outweigh the importance of a safe wintering ground.

Political filters

The scientists said they understand that politics has an appropriate role to play in wildlife policy. Ultimately, decision-makers will balance the need to protect an endangered species like the turtle with the needs of other species and with human wants and needs.

"It is understood that when the committee passes on a recommendation it is going to a political appointee who will run it through a political filter and decide what takes priority," said Andrews, the Middlebury College biologist. "What we hate to see is information run through a political filter even before it gets to the committee."

Laroche said his approach is based on a commitment to sound scientific investigation, not reaching a predetermined outcome. He said he will listen to the scientific advisory committee and try to address their concerns.

In the end, he said, it might be necessary to risk the loss of some Eastern spiny softshell turtles to gain a greater good.

"We don't want to eliminate the turtle from Vermont, but we have to look at risk versus benefit. If we are restoring a whole ecological connectivity and one species declines, maybe we can mitigate that. If the action we're taking has massively greater benefit, we can't be nitpicking or we'll never move forward with good things."

Contact Candace Page at 660-1865 or e-mail cpage@bfp.burlingtonfree-press.com

RITA: Damage, but it could have been much worse

Continued from Page 1A

Petrochemical plants that supply a quarter of the nation's gasoline suffered only a glancing blow, with just one major plant facing weeks of repairs. The re-flooding in New Orleans from levee breaks was isolated mostly to areas already destroyed and deserted, and could be pumped out in as little as a week. And contrary to dire forecasts, Rita and its heavy rains moved quickly north as a tropical depression instead of parking over the South for days and dumping a predicted 25 inches of torrential rains.

Most significantly, deaths were minimal — with only two reported so far — largely because residents with fresh memories of Katrina heeded evacuation orders and the storm followed a path that spared Houston and more populous stretches of the coast.

Along the central Louisiana coastline, where Rita's heavy rains and storm-surge flooding pushed water up to 9 feet in homes and into fields of sugarcane and rice, weary evacuees slowly returned to see the damage. Staring at the ground, shoulders stooped, clearly exhausted, many came back with stories of deer stuck on levees and cows swimming through seawater miles from the Gulf of Mexico.

"All I got now is my kids and my motorhome," said Tracy Savage, whose house in rural Vermilion Parish was four feet underwater. The 33-year-old diesel technician was able to salvage a toolbox and a few life vests, but not much more. "We've never had this much water, we've just never seen it."

More than 100 boats gassed up at an Abbeville car dealership Sunday before venturing out on search-and-rescue missions to find hundreds of residents believed to have tried to ride out Rita.

An estimated 1,000 people were rescued in Vermilion Parish, said Chief Sheriff's Deputy Kirk Frith. About 50 people remained on a 911 checklist, and Frith said authorities would probably conclude rescue operations by today and begin damage assessment.

Authorities were having trouble keeping residents with boats from entering the parish. "How are you going to stop them from going to their home to check on their dog or something like that?" Frith asked.

HEAT: High prices spur call for aid

Continued from Page 1A

are pressing Congress and the White House to help people like Rowell by increasing the amount of federal home heating aid available to the poor.

Sanders has collected more than 80 signatures from Republicans and Democrats on a letter to House and Senate spending committees urging the doubling of federal funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, to about \$4 billion.

In 2004, more than 19,300 Vermont families received heating assistance; 26,356 applied. There isn't enough money to help all the state's eligible residents, and last year's average grant of \$318 is not enough to keep pace with rising costs, Sanders said.

"The increase (in fuel costs) wipes out the average grant," said Mark Wolfe, executive director of the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association. "Budgeting alone won't help you pay the bill. The alternative is you don't buy medicine or you don't buy food."

Sanders proposes to pay for an increase in aid by persuading senators to abandon a Republican-led effort to repeal the estate tax. Senators don't seem anxious to move forward with the repeal, which would cost the federal government nearly \$1 trillion over the next 20 years.

"If things don't change, senior citizens and low-income families will go cold in Vermont this winter," Sanders said. "There will be no television cameras in the homes of senior citizens in Vermont this winter, but they will be victims of Katrina and of poverty just the same. People will be suffering. The government needs to help."

Rowell said she prays that

Saving energy

There are many steps consumers can take to lower energy bills and, at the same time, contribute to energy conservation. Here are some suggestions:

- Keep blinds or drapes open on sun-exposed windows during the day.
- Close fireplace dampers when not in use.
- Plug leaks around windows and doors with caulking and weather-stripping.
- Add insulation to walls, attics and basements.
- Make sure air ducts are insulated and sealed.
- Get a professional to tune up the furnace ahead of the heating season.
- Look for the government's Energy Star designation when upgrading windows, furnaces or appliances.
- Invest in a programmable thermostat, which can be set to lower temperatures at night or when the family is away.
- Replace leaky, single pane windows, doors and skylights with products designed for cold climates.
- Replace old furnaces and heat pumps with fuel-efficient models.

— The Associated Press

On the Web

Department of Energy: www.energysavers.gov
Energy Star: www.energy-star.gov
Alliance to Save Energy: www.ase.org

the basement in an old wood stove they have to keep warm. It fills their house up with smoke. It scares me so bad. It's just sad."

Gannett New Service correspondents Pamela Brogan and Doug Abraham contributed to this report.

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