

October 5, 2006

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Dear Mr. Walker;

I am writing to express disappointment with the recent recommendation by the Northwest Power & Conservation Council (NWPPCC) to discontinue support of efforts to restore populations of western pond turtles (*Clemmys marmorata*) in the Columbia Gorge (NWPPCC Project No. 200102700). Such an action, if approved, would threaten to negate years of painstaking recovery work by Oregonians and Washingtonians on behalf of this imperiled native species.

Specifically, a NWPPCC decision to eliminate funding support of turtle recovery efforts during 2007-2009 would result in a 30% cut to the Oregon Zoo's annual western pond turtle program budget and jeopardize our ability to continue to assist the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) with this project.

While they pre-date the golden age of dinosaurs, two-thirds of the world's 300 tortoise and freshwater turtle species are currently threatened with extinction – largely the result of poaching and habitat loss. The western pond turtle is classified as a Federal Species of Concern, State Endangered (WA), Sensitive Species (OR) and Species of Concern (CA). This inhabitant of streams, large rivers, and slow-moving water is one of only two native Washington turtle species.

The Oregon Zoo, since 1999, has invested some \$300,000 worth of staff time, materials and supplies into the development of a turtle head-starting program here in Portland. Newly-hatched turtles are annually collected from their nests in the wild and raised at the Zoo – an effort that has been proven to dramatically increase the number of turtles that survive to adulthood. Under optimal zoo conditions, the little turtles grow much faster than normal. After one year of care and feeding at the Zoo – once these turtles become too large to be eaten by non-native bullfrogs and bass – they are carefully returned to the area in which they were found.

To date, we have provided 256 turtles for release. During that time, we have also shared the ongoing saga of the western pond turtle recovery story with our 42,000 members and millions of Zoo visitors. Since 2005, the Zoo's marketing and development offices

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worked closely with WDFW, USFWS, BPA and NWPCC to provide this newsworthy story of private-public partnership with the media.

The discovery of eggs laid by mature, head-started adults makes us optimistic that this program is making a real difference. For a relatively modest amount of NWPCC investment, less than \$200,000 per year, a species is slowly coming back from the brink of extinction! But, given the continued presence of non-native predators such as bullfrogs and threats to turtle habitat, the NWPCC cannot pull the rug out from under this project and assume that progress will continue.

A NWPCC decision to “not fund” WDFW’s proposal for western pond turtle recovery during 2007-2009 – that includes support of our turtle head start program – would force the Oregon Zoo to re-assess its ability to continue with this project. As many new conservation projects – at home and abroad- are brought to our attention, we are challenged to make decisions that make good sense from both a conservation and economic perspective.

The Oregon Zoo is willing to continue to share the short-term resource burden associated with the western pond turtle recovery effort as it reflects our stated mission: *to inspire our community to create a better future for wildlife*. Given the fact that the Zoo’s essential operating costs continue to rise, we depend upon support from our program partners, including the NWPCC, to ensure that non-revenue generating efforts will achieve lasting success.

Thank you for the opportunity to express support for the continuation of Council funding for the recovery of the Western pond turtle in the Columbia River Gorge.

Sincerely,

Tony Vecchio  
Zoo Director

For Immediate Release  
September 21, 2006

OREGON ZOO NEWS

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Note to Editors: Video and photographs are available of turtle tracking and scientists collecting the tiny turtle hatchlings.

#### MEDIA ALERT

**What:** Forty-six western pond turtle hatchlings recently arrived at the zoo. The turtles were collected from nests in the Columbia River Gorge.

**Who:** Senior North America keeper, Amy Cutting, will show off endangered western pond turtle hatchlings and discuss what the zoo is doing to save these delicate creatures from extinction.

**When:** Tuesday, Sept. 26, at 10 a.m.

**Where:** The Oregon Zoo's Cascade Streams conservation lab. Media should meet Bill or Linda at Gate D.

#### ENDANGERED BABY TURTLES ROUNDED UP IN COLUMBIA GORGE

Oregon Zoo gives endangered turtles a chance to grow before returning them to the wild

PORTLAND, Ore. --The Oregon Zoo recently rounded up 46 western pond turtle hatchlings from nests near White Salmon, Wash., in the Columbia River Gorge, moving the endangered creatures to a safer environment for their "head start" program.

The hatchlings are housed in specially designed turtle tanks at the zoo's conservation lab near the Eagle Canyon exhibit. The turtles will reside there throughout the winter, where they can grow in safety. Next summer, they will be released back into the wild.

Conservation specialists have observed nests of the endangered turtles along the Columbia River since the eggs were laid in late summer. Under the supervision of pond turtle expert Kate Slavens, adult female western pond turtles were trapped and fitted with transmitters. The recovery workers then monitored the females every two hours during nesting season to determine their egg-laying locations.

Once a turtle had dug her nest in the dirt, laid her eggs, and covered the nest back up, the scientists stepped in to protect the nest with wire "exclosure" cages that helped prevent predators from dining on turtle eggs. The eggs were allowed to incubate naturally and then scientists dug up the newborn turtles shortly after hatching. The quarter-sized babies were gathered together and taken to the Oregon Zoo and Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo. After about 10 months, when the juvenile turtles have grown large enough to avoid being eaten by pond predators, they will be returned to their birthplace.

Just one decade ago, western pond turtles were on the verge of completely dying out in Washington. Habitat degradation and disease were and still are problems, but the biggest threat to fragile baby turtles is the bullfrog. Originating east of the Rockies, this non-indigenous frog has thrived throughout the west, driving pond turtles and a host of other small, vulnerable aquatic species to the brink of extinction.

Working collaboratively with Woodland Park Zoo, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Oregon Zoo helps the little turtles avoid the dangers of non-native bullfrogs and largemouth bass by head-starting the newly hatched turtles gathered from wild sites. The turtles are nurtured at both zoos until they grow large enough to avoid being eaten by these predators. Unlike wild turtles, zoo turtles are fed throughout the winter, so by their summer release the 10-month-olds are approximately as big as 3-year-old turtles.

"Giving young turtles a head start during the first months of their lives gives them a real edge," explains David Shepherdson, Oregon Zoo conservation program scientist. "Woodland Park Zoo and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife have been working to save Washington's western pond turtles for 17 years. We're glad that we can provide additional assistance in the fight to save these highly endangered turtles."

Some of the juvenile turtles are equipped with radio transmitters before release so biologists can learn more about post-release dispersal, habitat use during active and hibernation periods, and ultimately their survival rate.

The Oregon Zoo released 51 western pond turtles in the Columbia Gorge last summer. The latest releases brought the total number of head-started turtles to more than 850 -- a majority of the current existing population. Listed as an endangered species in Washington State and a sensitive species in Oregon, the western pond turtle was once common from Baja California to Puget Sound.

The Oregon Zoo's participation in the western pond turtle project is partially funded through WDFW and the Bonneville Power Administration.

The zoo is a service of Metro and is dedicated to its mission to inspire the community to create a better future for wildlife. Committed to conservation, the zoo is currently working to save endangered California condors, Oregon silverspot butterflies, western pond turtles and Kincaid's lupine. Other projects include studies on black rhinos, Asian elephants, polar bears and bats.

The zoo opens at 9 a.m. daily and is located five minutes from downtown Portland, just off Highway 26. The zoo is also accessible by MAX light rail line. Zoo visitors are encouraged to ride MAX or take TriMet bus #63 to the Oregon Zoo. Visitors who take the bus or MAX receive 50 cents off zoo admission. Call TriMet Customer Service, 503-238-RIDE (7433), or visit [www.trimet.org](http://www.trimet.org) for fare and route information.

General admission is \$9.50 (12-64), seniors \$8 (65+), children \$6.50 (3-11), and infants 2 and under are free. A parking fee of \$1 per car is also required. Additional information is available at [www.oregonzoo.org](http://www.oregonzoo.org) or by calling 503-226-1561.

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Caption: A baby western pond turtle emerges from its shell. The endangered turtles are collected from the Columbia River Gorge and taken to the Oregon Zoo where they are raised. The zoo rears the turtles to prevent them from being eaten by non-native species such as bull frogs and large-mouth bass. Once the turtles grow large enough to fend for themselves, they are released back into the wild. Photo by Michael Durham, courtesy Oregon Zoo.

Oregon Zoo " 4001 SW Canyon Rd. " Portland, Oregon 97221 " 503-226-1561 " [www.oregonzoo.org](http://www.oregonzoo.org)