

Environment

ST. PAUL, MN — During the 2024 legislative session, a bipartisan group of legislators introduced legislation to make Minnesota more competitive from a business perspective. SF 4876, which Senator Jordan Rasmusson of Fergus Falls co-authored as the lead Republican, would help streamline Minnesota's environmental permitting process.

This legislation has the support of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. Last month, the organization issued a comprehensive study on Minnesota's current permitting process, offering suggestions for improvements to ensure the state's economy continues to thrive. These recommendations serve as the foundation of Rasmusson's proposal.

SF 4876 was introduced in the Minnesota Senate on March 13th, and was referred to the Environment, Climate, and Legacy committee.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources plans to split up \$149.9 million in one-time state funding called the Get Out MORE (Modernize Outdoor Recreation Experiences) investments. DNR Commissioner Sarah Strommen some of the money will be used for infrastructure upgrades, enhancing fisheries, and restoring streams:

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[trdnrmoney1.mp3] :18 "TODAY'S OUTDOOR USERS"

(This is a one-time generational, transformational investment in ensuring Minnesotan's outdoor recreational experiences are welcoming and expendable and meet the needs of today's outdoor users)

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The investments will be allocated over the next five to six years.

Otter Tail County is pleased to announce that Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Commissioner Sarah Strommen has appointed Spencer McGrew, Otter Tail County Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Specialist, to serve on the Statewide Aquatic Invasive Species Advisory Committee. The Committee is comprised of 15 stakeholders who are responsible for advising the Minnesota DNR on its AIS Program.

As a member of the advisory committee, McGrew will collaborate with others to offer recommendations for improving the DNR's AIS programs. "Getting on the committee has been a goal I've been working on for several years, so it feels good to achieve it. We've got a lot to share in Otter Tail County that would benefit a statewide audience."

McGrew brings a breadth of experiences to the committee. For the past eight years, McGrew has led a team of watercraft inspectors who, last year alone, performed 11,940 watercraft inspections in the County. He serves on the Otter Tail County AIS Task Force and collaborates with over 53 businesses and 24 local government entities. McGrew also developed innovative solutions and services. He has instituted a dock and lift registry, added 16 I-LIDS camera systems at public access areas, and worked to install a groundwater-supplied self-service watercraft rinse station near Little Pine Lake.

"We encourage employees to participate in statewide organizations to gain knowledge and effect change," shared Chris LeClair, Otter Tail County Land and Resource Management Director. "This is a great opportunity for Spencer not only to learn but also share the innovations and success of the AIS program in Otter Tail County. His appointment to the committee is a testament to the respect Otter Tail County's AIS program has state-wide."

New research from the University of Minnesota found when combining artificial intelligence (AI) with remote sensing, farmers can drastically improve management of a major pest, the soybean aphid (AY-fid).

Entomologist Robert Koch (Cook) says the soybean aphid, originally from Asia, is an invasive species that's plagued North America, particularly Minnesota, for over two decades.

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[awaphidAI1.mp3] :15 (ON INDIVIDUAL PLANTS)

"Individually the aphids don't look very threatening, right? They're these tiny, little soft-bodied insects that suck the sap out of the plants, but you can get hundreds or thousands of them on individual plants."

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...Causing rapid and vast deterioration. But, Koch says this new technology will be able to detect plant stress caused by aphids, allowing farmers to base their pesticide applications on live data.

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[awaphidAI2.mp3] :06 (NEIGHBORS ARE SPRAYING)

"Rather than just spraying the field because it's a certain time of the year or because their neighbors are spraying."

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Koch says the technology will boost efficiency, as the current way farmers estimate how many aphids are in their crops is by hand counting each plant.

Carr's Tree Service has been awarded the contract for tree trimming and removal for the City of Fergus Falls for the 2024-2025 cycle.

The city's tree preservation program involves the removal of trees with Dutch Elm Disease, as well as the annual boulevard tree trimming program.

The city put out a request for bids to do the majority of the tree removal for the next two year cycle.

Carr's submitted a proposal, and was the only one received on time and complete.

The proposal was brought to the City Council meeting on Tuesday January 16th to be approved.

Public Works Director for the city, Len Taylor said to the council, "We've had the same contractor for the last three cycles, going on to the fourth, if you approve. Carr's Tree Service has done a fine job for us."

With a budgeted amount of \$165,000, which is noted to be lower than the 2019 amount of \$180,000, the council approved the proposal.

In 2023, Carr's removed a total of 199 trees, 98 of which were due to Dutch Elm Disease.

In the same year, the city planted 140 trees to replace those that were removed.

>>St. Cloud working toward goal of first city in world to create its own green hydrogen

(St. Cloud, MN) -- St. Cloud continues to work toward being the first city in the world to create its own green hydrogen, with a 1.1-million-dollar state grant already in hand and negotiations under way for another 3.7 million from the U.S. Department of Energy. Public Service Director Tracy Hodel says the project will use solar and biofuel generated to produce a carbon-free fuel source, basically turning a small amount of water into gases. She says, "What it takes to fill someone's hot tub - about 400 gallons of water - can produce enough electricity to power an average household for an entire year." Hodel says Metro Bus and New Flyer would be potential users of the green hydrogen gas produced at the facility. She says other potential uses include using it on-site to feed boilers, or selling it to Xcel Energy as a heating source.

>>45 MN Clean Energy Projects to Receive \$300K in Grants

(St. Paul, MN) -- Forty-five community-based renewable energy projects in Minnesota will receive a total of more than \$300,000 in Clean Energy Resource Teams Seed Grants. The projects range from educational outreach on clean energy incentives to skill-building for related careers. Deputy Commerce Commissioner Michelle Gransee says these projects support efforts across Minnesota to advance a cleaner, more equitable, resilient Minnesota for the future.

>>Minneapolis Woman Charged in Alleged Midwest Target Scheme

(Rochester, MN) -- A Minneapolis woman faces felony theft charges in Olmsted County in connection with an alleged scheme involving Target stores throughout the Midwest. A criminal complaint says 25-year-old Semaj Rankin is accused of participating in the theft of nearly \$650 from a Rochester Target store in June 2023. The complaint says surveillance video shows Rankin placing several items in a shopping cart and then going to guest services to request a return for those items. Rankin is scheduled to make her first court appearance early next month. The complaint does not provide additional details about the allegations related to a region-wide theft scheme.

>>Emerald Ash Borer Confirmed in Crow Wing County for First Time

(Brainerd, MN) -- Crow Wing County in the Brainerd lakes area is the 48th in the state with an emerald ash borer confirmation. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture says staff recently collected E-A-B larvae and samples had emerald ash borer. There is a quarantine limiting the movement of firewood and ash materials out of the Crow Wing County area. State ag officials hope to slow the spread of the tree-killing insect.

>>State Health Department releases first-ever Assisted Living Report Card

(St. Paul, MN) -- The Minnesota Department of Health released today (MON) a new resource for Minnesotans looking at assisted living. Assistant Commissioner Natasha Merz (murrs) says, "The Assisted Living Report Card is a tool that provides really a one-stop shop for consumers who want to look at assisted living and find out what the resident quality of life is like and what the family satisfaction is like." Merz says the report card currently features ratings for about 20 percent of the state's assisted living facilities with only more to come as the website develops.

(<https://alreportcard.dhs.mn.gov/>)

>>MN Flu Season Looks to be Mild

(Undated) – All signs point to a quiet flu season. State Department of Health Commissioner Brooke Cunningham: "We have had a relatively mild season to date although we've seen some increase in influenza recently. So I think as cases go up that will be the test to see whether the vaccine is a good match." Cunningham says in recent weeks we have seen a slight spike in cases and that's a good reminder that it's not too late to get vaccinated.

>>Deer Ticks Emerging in Minnesota Due to Warm Weather

(Dakota County, MN) -- Here's something you rarely hear in February -- ticks are starting to emerge in Minnesota. The Metropolitan Mosquito Control District says they found the first deer tick of the year in Dakota County on Monday. Ticks usually start appearing in March or April, but officials say the warm winter weather has allowed the tick to emerge ahead of schedule. Experts are urging Minnesotans to keep a close eye on pets to help prevent the spread of tick-borne illnesses like Lyme disease.

>>'Purple Rain' Broadway Musical Production to Premiere in Minnesota

(Minneapolis, MN) -- The musical adaption of the 1984 Prince movie "Purple Rain" is set to open in the spring of 2025 - but the premiere won't be on a Broadway stage in Manhattan. Hennepin Theatre Trust C-E-O Todd Duesing (DOO'-sing) says, "We are thrilled that the folks involved with the show have - as they should - decided to create, launch and do a pre-Broadway world premiere of Purple Rain in Minneapolis, Prince's hometown." Duesing (DOO'-sing) says the Minnesota-based musical will be staged at the State Theatre for several weeks. He says they expect the premiere shows to draw Prince fans from the across nation and world.

>>MN BWSR Accepting Applications for Water Storage Grants

(Undated) – The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) is doling out \$3 million in Water Storage Grant funds to create state-approved, locally adopted water management plans. BWSR (Bowser) Chief Engineer Rita Weaver says it's a grant local units of government can apply for to put more storage on a landscape, adding "We're not defining specifically what types of storage can go on it's more what the storage can do." Weaver says they want to see water storage reduce flooding, improve water quality, or mitigate climate change impacts. Applications are being accepted until 4:30 p.m. April 11th.

>>AG Ellison Secures \$85K for Solar Consumers Charged Early-Termination Fees

(St. Paul, MN) -- Attorney General Keith Ellison says he's secured around \$85,000 in refunds for Minnesota consumers of certain solar garden operators after they were unlawfully charged with early-termination fees (ETFs). Community solar gardens are large solar power installations that produce electricity sent to Minnesota's energy grid, giving operators credits in return, which can then be sold to consumers and used to offset their energy bills. The four operators, FastSun Solar LLC, Cypress Creek Renewables LLC, Generate Capitol Inc., and Global Atlantic Financial Group Limited, were all found guilty of charging 209 consumers up to \$250 or \$500 apiece in unreasonable E-T-Fs, agreeing to pay restitution and suspend enforcement of E-T-Fs in current contracts and not enter into new contracts with unlawful fees.

>>Spring Flooding Unlikely in Minnesota This Year

(Chanhassen, MN) -- The National Weather Service says spring flooding is unlikely in Minnesota this year. The agency's Chanhassen office released its spring flood outlook Thursday, saying the complete lack of snowpack in the state makes the probability of flooding lower than normal. The weather service says drought conditions in the state have improved slightly in the last few months thanks to rainfall over the Christmas holiday. Forecasters say drought conditions could quickly improve or worsen depending on how much precipitation falls in the next few weeks.

>>Minnesota Representatives Help Pass Bipartisan Tax Relief Bill

(Washington, DC) -- The U-S House is sending a 78-billion-dollar tax relief package to the Senate after passing it Wednesday evening on a 357-70 vote. Majority Whip Tom Emmer says the commonsense legislation will lower Americans' tax bills, boost U-S competitiveness and support small businesses. Congresswoman Angie Craig says it's estimated that the expanded child tax credit would benefit nearly 200 thousand children in Minnesota in its first year. Representative Ilhan Omar says she voted for the tax compromise to bring immediate financial relief to her constituents but much more could have been done for working families.

>>Superior National Forest officials worried about 2024 wildfire danger

(Duluth, MN) -- A mild, dry winter has Superior National Forest officials raising concerns about wildfire danger in 2024 — but it's too soon to tell how early it could start. Spokesman Nick Peatrack says minimal snowfall results in a lack of snow pack, or less moisture in the grounds and fields. He says, "With the lack of a heavy snowpack, it allows our fine fields, such as the grass and some of the other herbaceous field types, to stand up right more, instead of being compacted onto the forest floor." Peatrack says that increases fire danger because "often times, our tall grass is the carrier for surface fires and rates of spread seem to increase, as opposed to it being matted down."

>>Mayo Clinic Methodist Employees Picket in Rochester

(Rochester, MN) -- Employees at the Mayo Clinic Methodist Campus continue to press hospital administrators for better wages. Union members

The Fergus Falls Fire Department responded to the Wendell Fire Department's request for aid in stopping a wildfire on Sunday morning. The fast-paced fire was located in Western Township, just south of Orwell Dam, and was over one thousand acres in size. The smoke from the fire travelled North to Fergus Falls during the afternoon, causing "smokey conditions" in town. The fire was contained by the end of the day on Sunday. There are still several areas within the burned area that are smoldering and producing smoke. The MN DNR and US Fish and Wildlife fire response crews are continuing to work the incident.

>>Minnesota's New MMIR License Plate

(St. Paul, MN) -- The state of Minnesota is now selling a license plate to bring awareness to missing and murdered Indigenous people. The specialty plate was debuted Wednesday during a rally and march in Minneapolis. A fund that offers rewards for information about missing Indigenous people will receive 25 dollars for each plate sold. Marches and events to draw attention to crimes against Indigenous girls and women were also held in Duluth, Bemidji, Mahanomen, and Moorhead yesterday.

>>MN DNR Says Mississippi River Fish Deaths Caused By Thermal Stress

(Lake City, MN) -- The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is investigating the deaths of hundreds of fish in the Mississippi River. The fish were reported in the river in Lake City on February 3rd and in Wabasha on February 8th. The D-N-R says about a thousand fish died in all. The agency says the die-offs were caused by thermal stress related to recent high temperatures, and analysts are still looking at data collected from both locations.

>>U of M Board of Regents to Choose Next President Finalists Friday

(Minneapolis, MN) – A major step later this week (Fri) toward choosing the next president of the University of Minnesota, when the Board of Regents decides whether to move forward with four finalists recommended by a search committee -- at which point the candidate names become public. Regent Mary Davenport says the search committee agreed unanimously on the four recommended finalists. Davenport anticipates more than one finalist will be chosen -- unlike in 2018 when Joan Gabel was the only candidate in the final round. Finalists chosen by the Board of Regents will participate in public forums at the University's five campuses, followed by private interviews. Davenport expects a final decision by late February, with a July 1st target date for the U-of-M's next president to take over.

>>MN BWSR Accepting Applications for Fall 2024 Lawns to Legumes Program

(Undated) – The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR, pronounced BOWSER) is accepting applications for its fall 2024 Lawns to Legumes projects. Senior Ecologist Dan Shaw explains the program provides people with cost-share funding, workshops, coaching, and gardening resources to “increase habitats for at-risk pollinators through planting in residential landscapes.” Applications will be accepted through May 15th. Shaw says if you’ve previously applied for the program, you will need to reapply to be considered for fall 2024 funding.

>>MN DNR's 2023 Forest Health Report

(St. Paul, MN) -- A newly released report by the DNR offers a look into the condition of forests in the state. The 2023 Forest Health Annual Report monitors pests and disease outbreaks and tracks trends to help public land managers and private woodland owners understand overall forest conditions and management techniques. The DNR collected data through aerial surveys on 17.3 million acres of woodlands.

Among the findings:

- Spruce budworm damage on 664,800 acres of fir and spruce forests
- One million acres of damage to tamarack from the eastern larch beetle
- Eight new counties with emerald ash borer including Benton, Mille Lacs and Morrison counties
- Declining oaks primarily caused by older age and consecutive years of drought.

The full report can be found on the DNR's website.

>>MN Students Chosen for U.S. Senate Youth Program

(Minneapolis, MN) -- Two Minnesota high school students will join Senators Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith in representing the state during the 62nd annual U.S. Senate Youth Program (USSYP) Washington Week in March. Sydney McGrath of Minneapolis and Deepti Pillai of Eden Prairie were picked from MN's top student leaders to be a part of the 104 national student delegation, each also receiving a \$10,000 college scholarship for undergraduate study. The USSYP program will give the students a week-long study of the federal government with senators, President Biden, a Supreme Court justice, and more, aiming to instill "more profound knowledge of the American political process and a lifelong commitment to public service."

>>Minnesota Deer Harvest Down

(St. Paul, MN) -- The number of white-tailed deer harvested by Minnesota hunters last fall was lower than the previous year. According to the DNR, the harvest was down by 8% in 2023 compared to 2022 and 14% less than the five-year average. The total number of deer harvested last year was 158,678, compared to 172,265 the year before. The greatest decrease was seen in the northern part of the state, where the harvest was down by 21% in the northeastern region and 8% in the northwest. Chronic wasting disease remains relatively low in Minnesota, with only 43 hunter-harvested deer testing positive for CWD. Of those, 91% were in the southeastern region, which continues to experience persistent CWD infections in wild deer.

>>Man Shot by Stray Bullet in Blue Earth County near Mankato

(Mankato, MN) -- The Blue Earth County Sheriff's Office is investigating a weekend shooting incident south of Mankato in Decoria (duh-COR'-ee-uh) Township. A man reported being struck by a bullet that entered his home through an exterior wall early Saturday. Deputies say the bullet hit the man while he was in bed but did not cause a significant injury. Investigators say they located the possible origin of the gunshot three thousand feet away and shell casings that matched the bullet. They believe it was likely an accidental shooting.

>>U of M Study Shows Link Between Air Pollution, Childhood Cancer

(Undated) – A recent University of Minnesota study suggests that exposure to air pollution and vegetation may impact childhood cancer development. Dr. Lindsay Williams says when analyzing data from birth and cancer registries in Texas that estimate air pollution exposure among children who developed cancer and those who did not, they found that increasing air pollution during that early life period increases the risk of developing childhood cancer overall, and increased the risk of specific types of cancer like leukemia and some brain tumors. Williams says surprisingly, increased exposure to vegetation was linked to a reduced risk of certain brain tumors but an increased risk of other cancers. The team plans to investigate further to understand why these factors affect different cancers differently.

>>St. Louis County Sauna Fire

(Pequaywan, Township, MN) -- An early morning sauna fire in Pequaywan Township. According to the St. Louis County Sheriff's Office, the homeowners took a sauna around 9 p.m. Thursday, leaving a few embers burning in the stove before returning to the house. Around 3:00 this morning they woke to the sauna and a vehicle nearby fully engulfed in flames. No injuries were reported.

>>MN to Probably See Warmest Winter Ever Recorded

(Chanhassen, MN) – This December through February will go down as the warmest-ever meteorological winter in Minnesota. Pete Boulay (BOO'-lay) with the State Climatology Office says the average statewide temperature will probably be right around 25 degrees for the winter, which is 10 degrees above normal. Boulay says this means "we'll probably be the warmest winter on record in the state, edging out 1997-98 which is about 22-point-two degrees." He says Minnesota only had 13 days of "real" winter where the temperature was below normal. Warroad had the most snow in the state with about 40 inches.

>>DNR Says MN Moose Population Remains Stable

(St. Paul, MN) -- The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has reported that the number of moose in the state has stabilized after a significant drop in the last few decades. The department recently conducted its annual aerial moose count and found that there are just under 3,500 moose in the area, close to the yearly average of the last few years. The agency has attributed the decline in moose populations to climate change, predators, and parasites. These factors have collectively reduced the moose population by about 60% since the early 2000s.

>>Report: UnitedHealth May Have Paid \$22M To Stop Ransomware Attack

(Minnetonka, MN)-- Cybersecurity experts suggest that UnitedHealth may have paid \$22 million to a hacker group to end a ransomware attack. The attack was reported on one of its subsidiary companies last week by the Minnetonka-based healthcare group. UnitedHealth has not yet confirmed any ransom payment, but analysts believe that a \$22 million Bitcoin transaction from the company could be evidence of such a payment. UnitedHealth has stated that it is continuing to focus on investigating the attack.

Minnesotans would be able to purchase and present fishing, hunting, and boating licenses on a mobile app under a bill in the state Senate. D-N-R Colonel Rodmen Smith says the electronic licensing system bring us into the modern age and allows easier registration of harvested animals:

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[bpmnmobilelicense2.mp3] :16 "deer harvest"

("For example, my enforcement officers that run across somebody that doesn't have their license with them to be able take care of things in field if they have 'em but they just don't have them with 'em. And then also for our management partners like in Fish and Wildlife when they'll have a little better real time data when it comes to for example deer harvest.")

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Smith says registering a deer will be a one-step process on the mobile app. The Minnesota D-N-R did about two-point-three million license and permit transactions last year.

(Chanhassen, MN) -- The lack of a snowpack, continued drought, and abnormally dry conditions throughout much of Minnesota are keeping the spring flood risk low. National Weather Service hydrologist Craig Schmidt says it will take something like some major rainfall or some late-season snow followed by heavy rain or something like that in order for us to get much in the way of flooding. Now is typically the time of year when the depth of the snowpack and risk of ice jams on rivers precipitates spring flooding. Schmidt says the long-range forecast for March through May calls for above-normal temperatures

>>Woman Charged Following Red Lake Amber Alert Friday

(Red Lake, MN) -- A criminal complaint in Todd County reveals chilling details about the abduction of a toddler Friday that briefly sparked an Amber Alert in northern Minnesota's Red Lake Tribal Nation. It says 36-year-old Jennifer Stately was taken into custody during a traffic stop and officers located the boy in the backseat, claiming they could see scabs covering his entire body. They also reported Ethan had open sores, some of them actively bleeding, covering the majority of his face, and had a "very strong" body odor, "as if he had not been washed or changed in a few days." Stately is facing four felony charges, including third-degree assault of a victim under age four, child torture, malicious punishment of a child, and child neglect resulting in substantial harm.

>>MDA Awards \$150K in Grants to Combat Noxious Weeds

(St. Paul, MN) -- The Minnesota Department of Agriculture is awarding \$150,000 in grants to combat noxious weeds and invasive plants in the state. Noxious weeds are plants with the potential or are known to be harmful to humans or animals, the environment, crops, public roads, livestock, or other property. The money awarded 11 communities, including cities, counties, townships, conservation districts, and tribal nations can be used to purchase equipment and supplies, conduct mapping and outreach activities, and hire private applicators to manage noxious weeds.

>>Woman Found Dead in Rochester Lying in Snow

(Rochester, MN) -- Police in Rochester are investigating the death of a woman found in the snow Thursday afternoon. Officers say they located two people lying on the ground near the Rochester Math and Science Academy. A woman was dead at the scene, and a man was taken by ambulance to the hospital. Officers say they believe the woman was homeless. The Southern Minnesota Regional Medical Examiner's Office is expected to identify the woman and her cause of death.

>>Texas Wildfire Smoke Heading to Minnesota

(Undated) -- Smoke from the Texas wildfires is expected to hit Minnesota today. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reports that a plume of the Texas wildfire smoke will likely drift northeast over Minnesota. However, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency says the air quality today is expected to be in the green zone.

>>Former Cargill Worker Admits to Stealing Laptops to Sell Online

(Shakopee, MN) -- A Shakopee man is accused of stealing hundreds of company laptops from his former employer. Police say the defendant confessed to taking the electronic devices from Minnetonka-based Cargill so that he could sell them online. Charges have yet to be filed against the man.

>>MSP Airport Chik-fil-A Manager Charged with Embezzling \$140 K

(Minneapolis, MN) -- A manager at the Chik-fil-A restaurant at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport is accused of embezzling more than 140 thousand dollars. Federal prosecutors say 36-year-old Timothy Michael Hill of Woodbury collected the daily cash receipts from the airport restaurants and instead of depositing it into the safe deposit box, pocketed some or all of the cash. Court documents allege that Hill used future cash receipts to cover his theft and spent the money on jewelry, online sports betting and adult websites. He will make his first court appearance on five wire fraud charges February 14th.

>>Minneapolis Health Department Offering 1,000 Trees to City Property Owners

(Minneapolis, MN) — The Minneapolis Health Department is offering 1,000 trees to city property owners through a lottery, to help build the city's greenery. In partnership with Tree Trust, any Minneapolis property owner can enter the lottery to purchase up to two \$30 shade or evergreen trees, ranging anywhere from three to eight feet tall, weighing 20 to 40 pounds. Officials encourage anyone living in the city's "Green Zones," areas that have high levels of environmental pollution, to enter