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Military academy helps with bay cleanup

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Some high-tech assistance is being enlisted in the effort to remove old industrial waste from Croton Bay, an important habitat for fish and birds on the lower Hudson River.

The U.S. Military Academy at West Point sent a Blackhawk helicopter last week to precisely locate the roughly 2,000 railroad ties littering the bottom of the bay, and three cadets are creating a map of the debris and formulating ways to remove it.

The help from the military is part of a project by state and local conservationists to remove the railroad ties, which were dumped into the bay leading from the Croton River into the Hudson by the former New York Central Railroad during construction and maintenance carried out decades ago by the long-defunct railroad.

"It's a matter of coordination," said Vincent Tamagna, a Putnam County legislator who has been designated the Hudson River navigator by the federal government to coordinate cleanup activities. "It's a partnership, and we'll get the benefits from the military in terms of personnel and resources."

West Point has been brought in to assist with the cleanup because the Hudson River has been named an American Heritage River by the federal government and therefore is eligible to receive federal assistance for restoration work. The project also is being used as a teaching tool for students at the military academy.

"We took digital pictures, and we'll create a mosaic," said Lt. Col. Steve Huston, an assistant professor of geography and environmental engineering at West Point. "That will give us a handle on where they are, which will determine the feasibility of recovering them with a helicopter or other means."

The village of Croton-on-Hudson, along with the state Department of Environmental Conservation, has been seeking to remove the railroad ties since the late 1990s. "It's been an ongoing project for some time," Village Manager Richard Herbek said.

No specific plans have been drawn up for removing the water-soaked beams, and it is unclear how much removal might cost. Various scenarios involving helicopters, cranes or amphibious craft have been suggested informally.

Huston said a Blackhawk helicopter, which has a lift capacity of 10,000 pounds, could do the job, but there are numerous complications.

"One Blackhawk can pick up 10 at a time if needed," he said. "But it costs a lot to run a Blackhawk, and there's a lot of noise. It might not be cost-effective. The hard part is to put them (the railroad ties) together, packaged and tied." What to do with the ties once they are removed would be another challenge, he said.

Tamagna said it was likely a combination of ideas would have to be put together. A unit of engineers from the Army Reserve or the National Guard might be called to do the actual removal as a training exercise, he said. If all went well, he said, the cleanup could begin as early as the fall.

There would be no financial cost to Croton, Tamagna said.

In 2000, a \$50,000 state grant paid for an environmental assessment by the research group Hudsonia of Annandale, N.Y., and no major environmental problems were found to be associated with the railroad ties. A high level of lead associated with the debris was found in the bay's northern section, however, which could be harmful to the bird population that feeds there. The railroad ties are visible at low tide, covered at high tide.

Tamagna noted that the Croton Bay cleanup could be used as a test case for restoration projects elsewhere in the Hudson Valley, because tens of thousand of old railroad ties litter the shores and estuaries along the river. Removing them would restore the Croton Bay habitat to its previous state and eliminate hazards for kayakers and canoers who frequent its waters.

Neighbors who live along the bay are hoping the debris will be removed in the not-so-distant future.

"They're a visual blight," said Penny Markowitz-Moses, who lives in a condominium complex in Ossining overlooking the bay. "They were supposed to be removed a long time ago. When the tide is out, it's not a pretty sight. They're not environmentally friendly; they're not good for the habitat."

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