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Media Advisory

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Seven Wetland Stewards Win 2008 National Wetlands Awards

Washington, DC – Seven citizens have been recognized nationally for their on-the-ground wetland conservation efforts and decades-long dedication to protecting these important natural resources. A diverse panel of wetland experts assembled at the Environmental Law Institute (ELI) earlier this month to select the winners of the 2008 National Wetlands Awards.

This year's Award winners hail from all regions of the country and exemplify the extraordinary commitment and innovation that is so instrumental to conserving wetlands in the nation's communities.

“These wetland champions are restoring and protecting one of America's greatest natural assets through education, conservation, and dedication,” said Benjamin H. Grumbles, EPA's Assistant Administrator for Water. “These profiles, both in courage and in stewardship, show us all how to meet the President's national goal of increasing, not simply maintaining, the quantity and quality of our wetlands.”

The 2008 awardees are:

Valer and Josiah Austin, landowners from Arizona who have restored miles of wetlands on their ranch lands and worked on cross-border watershed management to restore wetland habitat;

Caroline Dean, a horticulturalist and teacher from Alabama who has led advocacy and education efforts to protect native flora and wildflowers found in wetlands throughout the Southeastern United States;

John Dorney, the Supervisor of the North Carolina Division of Water Quality's Program Development Unit who has been instrumental in the development of the state's wetland and stream protection programs;

Mildred Majoros, a Project Manager with the Trust for Public Land in Florida who has led efforts to protect hundreds of acres of coastal habitat in Puerto Rico;

Diane Nygaard, the founder of the non-profit Preserve Calavera who has raised awareness and aided in the purchase and restoration of wetlands in California;

Raymond Semlitsch, a Professor in the Division of Biological Sciences at the University of Missouri-Columbia whose research on amphibian ecology has raised awareness about the need to protect small wetlands and surrounding terrestrial habitat.

Collectively, the award winners have conserved thousands of wetland acres and have mobilized hundreds of individuals to contribute to wetland conservation. "The restoration and protection of the Nation's aquatic resources, especially wetlands, is a high priority for us," said Assistant Secretary of the Army, John Paul Woodley, Jr. "I am excited that work we are doing will supplement the fine wetlands work being done by the recipients of this year's awards." In May, the winners will take a well-deserved break from their efforts to receive their awards at a ceremony on Capitol Hill.

"We look forward to meeting the winners of this year's awards and honoring them for their extraordinary achievements in wetland conservation," said Dr. Jim Balsiger, Acting Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service. "We are proud to support ELI's National Wetlands Awards recognizing these individuals for their contributions to society and the aquatic environment. Healthy wetlands and ecosystems are vital to our nation's recreational and commercial fish and shellfish fisheries, and other living marine resources."

Program co-sponsors—the Environmental Law Institute, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, USDA Forest Service, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service—hope that recognizing wetland leaders for their efforts will inspire others to follow their example. Given the national importance of wetlands, the federal agencies that sponsor the Awards welcome the opportunity to recognize and encourage voluntary wetland conservation efforts.

"Wetlands are a vital link between our land and water resources, and they provide a variety of ecological services to forests and grasslands. The Forest Service is proud to support the National Wetlands Awards program and to recognize the extraordinary work of the Award recipients," commented Abigail R. Kimbell, Chief of USDA Forest Service.

The winners of the National Wetlands Awards demonstrate how citizens and communities can—and do—make a difference. Arlen Lancaster, Chief of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, stated, "Wetlands are some of the most productive and dynamic habitats in the world and are vital to the overall health of the environment. I salute the 2008 National Wetlands Awards winners and thank them for their outstanding contributions to the conservation of our Nation's wetlands."

"Wetlands provide optimum migrating, wintering, and breeding habitat for waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds and other wetland dependent wildlife species, as well as essential habitat for many neo-tropical birds. What we do for conservation today is important. What we do for conservation tomorrow is vital," said H. Dale Hall, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

For more information on the National Wetlands Awards Program, the 2008 awardees, or the May awards ceremony, please contact Amanda Martin at the Environmental Law Institute at (202) 939-3862 or wetlandsawards@eli.org. Information is also available online at www.nationalwetlandsawards.org.

2008 National Wetlands Awards Winners

AWARD FOR EDUCATION & OUTREACH

Caroline Dean, *Opelika, Alabama*

For over 40 years, Ms. Dean has dedicated herself to advocating for and educating others about native flora and wildflowers in the Southeastern U.S., especially those found in wetlands. She has contributed an extensive collection of photographs and descriptions to the Auburn University botanical archives and led rescue efforts to save plants from impending development. Ms. Dean frequently shares her expertise and enthusiasm in presentations to garden clubs, Cooperative Extension audiences, and Teachers' Conservation Workshops and maintains a highly regarded website about Alabama wildflowers that has received nearly 100,000 visitors since 1995. Her continued efforts are particularly remarkable as she approaches her ninetieth birthday in summer 2008.

AWARD FOR SCIENCE RESEARCH

Raymond Semlitsch, *Columbia, Missouri*

Dr. Semlitsch is a Professor in the Division of Biological Sciences at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He is a leader in amphibian ecology and has led the conservation of small isolated wetlands by documenting their importance to the survival of amphibians and reptiles. His most important work established the ecological connection between aquatic and terrestrial environments for semi-aquatic species and defined terrestrial habitat around wetlands as "core habitat" for management and conservation. He currently is working on three projects that focus on the impacts of forest management on wetland-breeding amphibians, the balance between biodiversity conservation in isolated wetlands and land-use practices, and development of better wetland mitigation practices. He has written several books, chapters, and over 170 scientific journal articles.

AWARD FOR CONSERVATION & RESTORATION

Mildred Majoros, *South Miami, Florida*

Ms. Majoros, a Project Manager with the Trust for Public Land, led an initiative to acquire 270 acres of coastal habitat— including 212 acres of intertidal and emergent wetlands – in Puerto Rico that benefits 14 federally-listed threatened and endangered species. The site includes one of the most important nesting grounds for the federally endangered leatherback sea turtle. Because of her efforts, this land has been permanently protected by the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico as the San Miguel Natural Reserve. She is currently negotiating with landowners to protect an additional 140 acres in the Northeast Ecological Corridor.

AWARD FOR LANDOWNER STEWARDSHIP

Valer and Josiah Austin, *Pearce, Arizona*

Mr. and Mrs. Austin have invested in the maintenance of open spaces and restoration of watersheds to promote the biodiversity of the Sonoran Desert region in southeastern Arizona. Their work began with restoration of more than 40 miles of washes on the El Coronado and Bar Boot Ranches. Recognizing the importance of a more regional approach, they expanded efforts to include restoration of wetland ecosystems on their ranches in San Bernardino Valley on the borderlands of the U.S. and Mexico. The beginning of recovery of the 1.6 miles of wetlands on the San Bernardino Ranch in Sonora, Mexico is underway. In cooperation with numerous U.S. and Mexican organizations, the Austins are working on cross-border watershed management and a biological corridor initiative that will contribute to the restoration of wetland habitat.

AWARD FOR STATE, TRIBAL, & LOCAL PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

John Dorney, *Raleigh, North Carolina*

Mr. Dorney, an employee of the North Carolina Division of Environmental Quality, has been the visionary and driving force behind the development of North Carolina's wetland and stream protection programs since 1990. He has taken the state from a one-person operation to having one of the finest wetland protection programs in the country. His greatest accomplishment is the inclusive, multidisciplinary philosophy that is the underpinning of the state's program. His primary activities are numerous, but several examples include: developing rules to protect wetlands, expanding the Clean Water Act §401 water quality certification program, and developing policy for wetland-related programs.

AWARD FOR WETLAND COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Diane Nygaard, *Oceanside, California*

Ms. Nygaard founded the non-profit Preserve Calavera, which, under her leadership, has become the largest conservation group in north San Diego County. Through this organization, she raised awareness of local leaders and the community regarding the importance of and threats to wetlands. Her major accomplishment has been to help purchase and restore the 134 acre Sherman property in Carlsbad, California. She also has provided comments that have led to avoidance and minimization of wetland impacts, helped secure wetland acquisition, wrote stream buffer guidelines, organized community wetland restoration projects and media efforts, and trained volunteers to monitor frog populations.

ELI is an independent, non-profit research and educational organization based in Washington, DC. The Institute serves the environmental profession in business, government, the private bar, public interest organizations, academia, and the press.