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### ***Six Wetland Stewards Receive 2011 National Wetlands Awards***

(Washington, D.C.) The Environmental Law Institute announced today that six recipients from across the country have been recognized for their exceptional and innovative contributions to wetlands conservation. “Once again, ELI is proud to have worked with a team of leading experts to choose the winners of the national wetlands awards,” stated ELI President Leslie Carothers. “With our partners from six federal agencies, we look forward to an awards ceremony that showcases the remarkable contributions the winners have made to a healthy and productive environment.”

The 2011 National Wetlands Award recipients will be honored at a ceremony on May 4, 2011, at the U.S. Botanic Garden. These award winners have restored, researched, and protected thousands of acres of wetlands nationwide. Their examples have inspired many members of their community to act and make a difference to protect and improve these vital natural resources.

This year’s Award recipients and their accomplishments appear below:

***Rio de la Vista’s*** enthusiasm and creativity has brought together numerous partners and private landowners to protect more than 27,000 acres of wetlands in Colorado. She wrote a groundbreaking grant that tied the purchase of conservation easements to senior surface water rights to the land—an important initiative to help secure the long-term protection of wetlands along the Rio Grande.

***Margaret Sedlecky***, a 25-year veteran teacher of the Baldwin County Public Schools in Alabama, has conducted hands-on environmental education program for more than 3,000 students, and leads the Baldwin County Grasses in Classes program—guiding student volunteers in planting 40,000 native plants and restoring 15 acres of coastal habitats.

***Scott House*** has created and expanded more than 1,200 acres of wetland habitat on his land, Bearitage Farms, in Arkansas. Investing his own time and money, he has reshaped the landscape by encouraging numerous neighbors to donate thousands of acres of wetlands to strengthen this important habitat for migratory birds in the Mississippi Flyway.

**Loren Smith** is regarded by his peers as the top authority on playa wetlands and one of the world's leading scholars on wetland ecosystem science. Head of the Zoology Department at Oklahoma State University, his research has been instrumental in shaping and expanding our understanding of the role that playa wetlands play in providing habitat for millions of migratory birds across Great Plains states.

**Janet Morlan**, state wetlands program manager for the Oregon Department of State Lands, is a driving force behind many policy improvements and advances that make Oregon's wetland program a national model for wetland conservation and protection.

**Todd Miller** founded the North Carolina Coastal Federation in 1982. Three decades later, the organization has undertaken multi-million dollar conservation efforts and partnerships, educated thousands of North Carolinians, restored 40,000 acres of estuaries, and has been involved in every major coastal policy issue since its beginning.

The National Wetlands Awards program—administered by the Environmental Law Institute and supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, NOAA Fisheries, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Federal Highway Administration, and the USDA Forest Service—recognizes outstanding individual achievement in wetlands conservation.

“The recipients of the 2011 National Wetlands Awards demonstrate a passion and level of personal commitment to conservation that is both inspirational and daunting. They also represent the wide range of people involved in wetlands conservation, from scientists and educators to landowners and community leaders, who are changing the course of our nation's future for the better,” said Dave White, Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). “NRCS is honored to participate with the Environmental Law Institute and our federal partners in recognizing their distinguished achievements and extraordinary efforts conserving America's wetlands.”

Collectively, the impact of the 2011 National Wetlands Awards recipients is substantial—their expertise, experience, and examples have profoundly shaped the landscape of wetlands conservation. “We look forward to meeting this year's award winners and honoring their extraordinary achievements in wetland conservation,” said Eric Schwaab, Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service. “We are proud once again to support ELI's National Wetlands Awards, recognizing these individuals for their contributions to society and the aquatic environment. Wetlands provide essential support for self-sustaining ecosystems, valuable fisheries and protected resources, water quality, and resilient coastal communities.”

“The U.S. Forest Service is proud to partner with ELI in its National Wetlands Awards program,” said Tom Tidwell, Chief of the USDA Forest Service. “Wetlands provide an array of benefits to society and are integral to healthy, sustainable watersheds by protecting and improving water quality, providing fish and wildlife habitats and mitigating floodwaters. We are excited to recognize the recipients of this year's awards and honor their achievements.”

“Wetlands are among the most valuable water resources in our country,” said Nancy Stoner, Acting Assistant Administrator for Water at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. “This year’s winners demonstrate through their actions a deep and tireless commitment to preserving the value of wetland resources. Their dedication inspires us in our own efforts to protect and restore our nation’s wetlands.”

“Wetlands provide tremendous services to society, in addition to their vital importance for functioning ecosystems. We are so proud to be a part of the celebration for those people who protect and restore our nation’s wetlands for the benefit of all Americans,” said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Acting Director Rowan Gould.

For more information on the National Wetlands Awards program, the 2011 Award recipients, or the Awards ceremony in May, please contact Landon Yoder at (202) 939-3829 or [wetlandsawards@eli.org](mailto:wetlandsawards@eli.org), or visit [www.nationalwetlandsawards.org](http://www.nationalwetlandsawards.org). Photos of the ceremony will be available on the Awards’ website within a few days of the ceremony.

### **2011 National Wetlands Awards Recipients**

#### **AWARD FOR CONSERVATION & RESTORATION**

##### **Rio de la Vista**

Ms. Rio de la Vista’s trustworthy reputation, enthusiasm, and vision brings private landowners, conservation organizations, and government agencies together through creative partnerships that have protected over 27,000 acres of wetlands, many on private lands, across the San Luis Valley (SLV) in Colorado. Ms. de la Vista’s brainchild, the Rio Grande Initiative (RGI), a project under the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, protects more than 19,000 acres and 33 miles of the Rio Grande, including rangeland, wildlife habitat, and senior surface water rights. Ms. de la Vista wrote and received a groundbreaking grant from the Colorado Water Conservation Board for \$1.5 million to purchase conservation easements along the river, successfully showing that the value of senior surface water rights to the land also benefited the river, wetlands, and aquifer. Ms. de la Vista brought many landowners onboard and the RGI more than doubled the pace of conservation along the river, adding 13,000 acres from 2007–2010. Her efforts have achieved \$25 million in funding, with \$10 million being donated by private landowners, and partnerships with many conservation organizations. Ms. de la Vista also brought together numerous partners for the Rock Creek Heritage Project, which permanently protects 8,000 acres of private land, with nearly half of those lands buffering the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge.

#### **AWARD FOR EDUCATION & OUTREACH**

**Margaret Sedlecky**

Ms. Margaret Sedlecky, 25-year veteran teacher of the Baldwin County Public Schools in Alabama, instills the environmental value of wetlands in the minds of students, teachers, and the public. For the past 15 years, she has served as the education coordinator for the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve. With the reserve as her classroom, Ms. Sedlecky conducts hands-on environmental education programs for more than 3,000 K-12 students annually. After Hurricanes Ivan in 2004 and Katrina in 2005, Ms. Sedlecky organized teachers and conservation organizations to plan coastal restoration efforts; from this endeavor, the Baldwin County Grasses in Classes (BCGIC) program was born. As the BCGIC program coordinator, Ms. Sedlecky received over \$100,000 in grants, directed the planting of 40,000 native plants, managed the restoration of 15 acres of coastal habitats, and logged more than 1,500 hours of work from student volunteers. She has conducted two EstuaryLive broadcasts, which are virtual fieldtrip broadcast online from the reserve that have allowed students across the country to ask questions and receive answers from local estuary experts. She currently oversees the development of Estuaries 101, a national middle school curriculum that will be housed on the National Estuarine Research Reserve System's website, [www.estuaries.gov](http://www.estuaries.gov). Ms. Sedlecky spearheaded an effort to develop guidelines for Baldwin County schools to prevent the growing of invasive plants on school campuses, which raised awareness and educated teachers and student about environmental stewardship. Ms. Sedlecky has received several local, state, and regional awards in recognition of her diligence in protecting Alabama's coastal habitats.

### **AWARD FOR LANDOWNER STEWARDSHIP**

#### **Scott House**

Mr. Scott House's investment of time and capital in northeast Arkansas has created and expanded wetland habitat in the critical Mississippi Flyway. In 1997, Mr. House began restoring 203 acres along the L'Anguille River on his land, Bearitage Farms. His contribution now totals 1,260 acres and includes diverse habitats, such as green tree reservoirs, moist soil and wetland areas, hardwood forests, and tupelo-cypress swamps. Mr. House actively engages neighbors in his pursuit, resulting in the donation of 15,000 acres of formerly cropped lands that are now flooded for wintering migratory birds. Utilizing Natural Resources Conservation Service programs and support from Ducks Unlimited and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mr. House has reshaped the landscape by planting over 60,000 trees almost single-handedly, contouring large tracts of land, adding seven re-lift pumps to actively manage water depths and vegetative composition, and building a levee system across 265 acres to help form a green timber impoundment for wintering waterfowl. He recently donated 85 acres to create a "prairie pothole" wetland, providing mixed-depth habitat for dabbling and diving ducks and awarded Arkansas State University a permanent wetland easement for research and education.

### **AWARD FOR SCIENCE RESEARCH**

#### **Loren Smith**

Dr. Loren M. Smith is regarded by his peers as the top authority on playa wetlands and one of the world's leading scholars on wetland ecosystem science. In 25 years of research, he has published more than 170 scholarly articles, functioned as the major advisor to 35 graduate students, achieved over \$5 million in extramural funding, served on numerous editorial boards of scientific journals, and in just the past five years, Dr. Smith has been the principle investigator on 20 federal, state, and privately funded research projects. He has written several acclaimed books, including, *Habitat Management for Migrating and Wintering Waterfowl in North America*, which is the reference standard for researchers and conservationists, and *Playas of the Great Plains*, named Outstanding Book of the Year in 2004 by the Wildlife Society. In 2010, the Society of Wetland Scientists inducted Dr. Smith as a fellow, the organization's highest honor. Beyond his professional accomplishments, his peers credit him with stepping beyond the common boundaries for scientists by engaging conservation professionals to see the big picture in how management decisions and conservation practices affect wetlands and the landscape. His expertise on playa wetlands is especially consequential because they often lack regulatory protection.

#### **AWARD FOR STATE, TRIBAL, AND LOCAL PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**

##### **Janet Morlan**

Ms. Janet Morlan, state wetlands program manager for the Oregon Department of State Lands, is a driving force behind many policy improvements and advances that make Oregon's wetland program a national model. Known for being academically thoughtful, linking sound science with strong wetland policies, and delivering solutions, Ms. Morlan has lead the development of Oregon's wetland assessment methods, initiated and managed a status and trend study to determine the effectiveness of Oregon's wetland protection laws, participated in two working groups that developed regional supplements to the 1987 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers *Wetland Delineation Manual*, and developed interagency training for more than 300 agency staff and private consultants, and developed wetland inventory standards that have been used by 85 Oregon cities. Recently, Ms. Morlan spearheaded the development and implementation of the Oregon Rapid Wetland Assessment Protocol, designed to assess the functions and values of all types of wetlands within the state. She donates much of her time after hours, serving as a board member or office with professional societies, and on outreach efforts to educate local governments and the public on wetlands.

#### **AWARD FOR WETLAND COMMUNITY LEADER**

##### **Todd Miller**

Mr. Todd Miller, founder of the North Carolina Coastal Federation (NCCF), has protected the state's valuable coastal wetlands for three decades. Started in 1982 with the successful mobilization of fishermen and farmers that defeated a proposal to strip-mine 120,000 acres of peat bogs, the NCCF now includes 20 staff members that undertake many wetland conservation efforts, ranging from small plots that involve a handful of students or volunteers to large tracts requiring millions of dollars and complex partnerships. The organization has been involved in every major coastal policy issue in

last 28 years, helped educate thousands of children and adults, restored more than 40,000 acres of estuaries and purchased almost 10,000 acres of land. Mr. Miller's advocacy has helped develop and implement numerous laws and policies, including the NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund. In 2008, Mr. Miller's leadership provided wetlands restoration and prevented river contamination from agricultural pollutants at the North River Farm project—one of the largest restoration project of its kind in the nation and a template for private-public partnerships and science-based ecosystem restoration. A founding member of Restore America's Estuaries, Mr. Miller helps diverse stakeholders find common ground and is recognized for his skill in motivating citizens to be coastal stewards.

*The Environmental Law Institute strengthens environmental protection through improving law and governance worldwide. ELI delivers timely, insightful, impartial analysis to opinion makers, including government officials, environmental and business leaders and journalists. ELI is a clearinghouse and a town hall, providing common ground for debate on important environmental issues.*

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