

Leaping Steelhead Awards for 2009

by Dan Bacher
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The Leaping Steelhead Awards are presented every year to those who have fought the good fight in the battle to restore California's fish populations and aquatic ecosystems.

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2009 was a year marked by an increased assault on California fisheries from politicians from both the Democratic and Republican parties, corporate agribusiness and southern California agribusiness.

The salmon closure continued on the ocean, with the exception of a brief 10-day season on the North Coast in late August and early September. The Central Valley river closures continued also, with the exception of a six-week season on the Sacramento River from Red Bluff to Knights Landing.

Corporate agribusiness launched an "Astroturfing" campaign to put a "human face" on agribusiness by claiming that tens of thousands of farmworkers were unemployed because of restrictions on pumping protecting Delta smelt and king salmon. The Latino Water Coalition, a front for corporate agribusiness instigated by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, waged relentless campaign throughout the year, highlighted by a fake "March for Water" in April, pushing for the peripheral canal, more dams and end to pumping restrictions.

Lloyd Carter, longtime investigative journalist, wrote a scathing piece, "The PR Firm from Hell," exposing this Astroturf campaign on his blog and elsewhere, as part of a carefully developed campaign for Burson Marsteller. He also wrote a follow-up article on the Latino Water Coalition, as well as a great piece in the Golden Gate Law Review about how Westlands Water District profits off rural poverty.

In a similar vein, Mike Fitzgerald wrote a series of excellent columns in the Stockton Record exposing the lies of the astroturfers about the greatly exaggerated "drought" and the false issue of "fish versus jobs, including his column, "when it comes to Valley ag, Sea Hannity is all wet."

For their fearless investigative journalism that contrasts with the blind acceptance of the Astroturf group claims by both corporate media and some alternative media, Lloyd Carter and Michael Fitzgerald receive the "Expose Big Ag's Big Lies" award for 2009.

A great effort by fishing groups forced the gutting of AB 1253, a dangerous bill sponsored by corporate agribusiness that would have removed Fish and Game protections for striped bass, in the Legislature on April 29. Robert Johnson, founder of Californians Against the Canal, Author Dan Blanton, John Beuttler, conservation director of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, Gary Adams of the California Striped Bass Association, Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, bass pro Bobby Barrack, Dick Pool, administrator of water4fish.org, Roger Thomas, president of the Golden Gate Fishermen's Association, the Coastside Fishing Club and other groups and individuals involved in this battle receive the "Save the Stripers" award for rallying anglers against this insane bill.

While Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg and Assembly Speaker Karen Bass, in collaboration with Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, forced the passage of a water policy/water bond package that will lead to the construction of a peripheral canal and more dams, some courageous Delta legislators showed actual leadership and worked with Delta residents, family

farmers, fishermen, environmental groups and environmental justice groups to save the Delta's fisheries and people.

These dedicated legislators – Senator Lois Wolk (D-Davis), Assemblywoman Mariko Yamada (D-Davis), Assemblywoman Joan Buchanan (D-Alamo), Senator Mark Desauter (D-Concord) and Alyson Huber (D-El Dorado Hills) – get the “Legislators of the Year” award for standing up against the Legislature's and Governor's bail out for big ag.

While some “Big Green” NGOs collaborated with Schwarzenegger to kick Indian Tribes, commercial fishermen, seaweed harvesters and others off the ocean under the fast track Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA) process, a courageous group of folks organized the “Seaweed Rebellion” at Point Arena in June to unite fishermen, tribes, seaweed harvesters and environmentalist against the corrupt MLPA.

Four people deserve special recognition for exposing the conflicts of interest behind the MLPA process and showing how there is nothing “green” behind the MLPA process – John and Barbara Stephens-Lewallen, Craig Bell, Mendocino County Fish and Game Commission Chair, and Jim Martin, West Coast Director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance. For their outstanding efforts, they each receive a “Real Environmentalist” award.

The California Fish and Game Commission on August 5, in imposing new marine reserves under the MLPA on the North Central Coast, banned the Kashia Pomo Tribe and other tribes from harvesting abalone, mussels and seaweed off Stewarts Point, as they have done for centuries.

“What you are doing to us is taking the food out of our mouths,” said Lester Pinola, the past chairman of the Kashia Rancheria. “When the first settlers came to the coast, they didn't know how to feed themselves. Our people showed them how to eat out of the ocean. In my opinion, this was a big mistake.” For speaking up for the sovereign rights of tribes under the corrupt MLPA process, Pinola receives the “Fish Quote of the Year” award.

While others fought against the unjust MLPA, Herman Garcia and a large group of community volunteers every year rescue steelhead smolts and adults on Uvas Creek in Gilroy. Members of his group, the Coastal Habitat Education & Environmental Restoration (CHEER), also engage in regular creek clean-ups, teaming up with homeless people to fill two truck beds with garbage in May 2009. Herman Garcia and the CHEER volunteers are honored with the “Salmon Restoration Activists” award.

The Winnemem Wintu Tribe held two war dances, one in 2004 to oppose the raising of Shasta Dam and the other in April 2009 to regain federal recognition, and has fought against the peripheral canal for the past several years. Now they are engaged in a big campaign to return salmon back into the McCloud River.

Last year they began to organize a trip this March to New Zealand, where McCloud River salmon were introduced in late 19th Century, to bring eggs back to the McCloud River. The tribe has proposed getting the salmon over Shasta Dam by building a connecting channel between Dry Creek, which now empties into the reservoir, and Cow Creek, a Sacramento River tributary. It is therefore fitting that the “Bringing Back the Salmon” award goes to the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, including Mark Franco, headman, and Calleen Sisk-Franco, chief and spiritual leader.

The “Undam the Klamath” award is given to the Klamath Riverkeeper board and staff for their unceasing efforts to remove Klamath dams, restore water quality on the river and stop the periodic dewatering of the Scott and Shasta rivers by agribusiness.

Their staff includes Erica Terence, Riverkeeper, Scott Harding, Executive Director, Malena Marvin, Outreach and Science Director, Georgiana Myers, Tribal Empowerment Coordinator and Yurok Tribal Member, and Evelyn Roether, Bookkeeper/Administrator. The Riverkeeper board

includes Vice-President Craig Tucker, Karuk Tribe Klamath River Campaign Coordinator, President Daniel Cooper, Lawyers for Clean Water, Treasurer, Stephanie Tidwell, Executive Director, Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Center, Peter Brucker, Salmon River Restoration Council, Leaf Hillman, Karuk Tribe, Dania Rose Colegrove, Klamath Justice Coalition and Hoopa tribal member, Terry O'Day, Environment Now Foundation, and Nathaniel Pennington, Klamath Salmon Media Collaborative.

The organizations that fought furiously against passage of the Delta policy and water bond package – a clear path to the peripheral canal - include Friends of the River, Restore the Delta, Planning and Conservation League, Sierra Club California, California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, Center for Biological Diversity, Clean Water Action, California Striped Bass Association, Environmental Justice Coalition for Water, California Water Impact Network, Delta farmers and water districts, and many others. These hard core opponents of the process deserve special recognition for standing up for democratic principles, the people of the Delta and California's fisheries and are honored with the "Healthy Delta Smelt" award.

In addition, a special "Chrome Bright Salmon" award goes to Debbie Davis, policy director of the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water, Steve Evans, conservation director for Friends of the River, Charlotte Hodde water program manager of the Planning and Conservation League, Jennifer Clary from the Clean Water Network, Jeff Miller from the Alameda Creek Alliance and Center for Biological Diversity and Roger Mammon of the California Striped Bass Association for their many efforts fighting the legislation.

In the battle against the peripheral canal, Bruce Connelley, an Oakley City Councilman, organized the most creative event of the year, the "Million Boat Float" from Antioch to Sacramento in August. Although the event didn't attract the thousands of boats that many were hoping for, it received a ton of mainstream and alternative media coverage about the campaign to save the Delta that wouldn't have been generated otherwise. Connelley is bestowed the "Creative Organizing" award for putting the "Million Boat Float" together.

Finally, Barbara Daly of Save the Delta and Kim Glazzard from Organic Sacramento organized rallies and demonstrations outside of Darrell Steinberg's office to oppose the water policy/water bond package. They have engaged in a whirlwind of activity to save the Delta and its fisheries.

Likewise, Bill Jennings, executive director of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, and Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, campaign director of Restore the Delta, have held steadfast against the corporate greenwashers in the battle to defend the Delta, sending out constant news releases and organizing people to go to rallies and hearings at the State Capitol.

For these reasons, these four very deserving individuals receive the "Leaping Steelhead" of the Year awards.