

Valley Life

Okanogan Valley Land Council named Fish and Wildlife Organization of the Year

BY EMILY HANSON
STAFF WRITER

EPHRATA - The Okanogan Valley Land Council (OVLC) received this year's Organization of the Year award during a ceremony with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) on Wednesday, July 22.

A press release from the WDFW states that the OVLC was established in 2002 and has worked with six landowners to protect nearly 2,000 acres of native shrub-steppe and riparian habitat from development by securing easements on the properties.

"Using agricultural easements, the land trust also provided similar protection for a 1,025-acre cattle ranch and 600 acre in the Okanogan Highlands," the press release states.

Berent Culp, executive director of the OVLC said the OVLC will be celebrating this award as well as their new staff and office at an open house on Thursday, July 30 from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. in the new office. The new office is located at 416 ½ South Whitcomb Ave #3, Tonasket, WA

For additional information, contact Culp at 509-846-3394 or Cari Haug at 509-486-2765 or e-mail them at ovlc.communitynet.org

The Educator of the Year Award was presented to Scott Olsen and George Thornton. Olson, a principal and instructor at the Tonasket Alternative School, and Thornton, a teacher with the Oroville School District, worked together to engage their students in a photo-monitoring project, designed to assess environmental changes in the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area, the press release states. Students

developed an understanding of local history, area botany, photography, global positioning system (GPS) skills and other disciplines.

The WDFW also presented five state residents with the Volunteer of the Year awards.

"Our department, perhaps more than any other in state government, relies heavily on volunteers for help in meeting our objectives," Phil Anderson, WDFW interim director, said. "Fortunately, we have a strong network of support, as evidenced by the people we are honoring this year."

According to the recipients of the 2009 Volunteer of the Year award were:

Jerry Ponti, who operates a veterinary clinic east of Spokane, has treated hundreds of wild animals along with pets and livestock over the past 30 years. Wildlife biologists have long relied on Ponti to care for sick and injured deer, raccoons, eagles, bobcats and other wildlife.

Mike Braaton, of Castle Rock, who has spent hundreds of hours over the past decade planting elk forage, pulling scotch broom and conducting wildlife surveys on WDFW projects at the Mount St. Helens Wildlife Area. A professional mechanic, he has helped to keep project equipment running and has personally secured several grants for work at the wildlife area.

Bill Butler, of Cheney, who first volunteered with WDFW in 1964 and spent more than two decades helping staff at the Spokane Hatchery spawn rainbow trout. A longtime member of the Inland Northwest Wildlife Council and the Bighorn Foundation, he also has coordinated efforts to restore upland game habitat and promote outdoor

education.

Robert Heirman, of Snohomish, who has volunteered his time, money and expertise to projects benefiting fish and wildlife recreation for more than 50 years. His contributions include planting fish in lakes and streams, building fishing docks, conducting salmon derbies and preserving what are now the Bob Heirman Wildlife Park and Lord's Hill Park in Snohomish County for outdoor recreation.

Charles "Stan" Staniforth, of Bellevue, who has tallied thousands of hours leading tours and teaching schoolchildren about salmon at the Issaquah Salmon Hatchery. He also helps hatchery staff clean incubation trays, tally fish and maintain the facility.

Finally, the WDFW also presented Landowner of the Year awards to:

Jack Burkhalter, a lifelong resident of Pacific County, who has worked with state fishery managers for 30 years to establish and maintain viable populations of salmon in the various streams flowing through his property.

Richard and Kathy Rice and family, who own a 10,000 acre farm in Douglas County. The Rice family has worked for the past decade to preserve and improve hundreds of acres of habitat for wildlife, notably Columbian sharp-tailed grouse.

Karen and Tony Spane, who won a 300-acre dairy farm in the Marshland Diking District near Everett. The Spanes were early supporters of a proposal by the City of Everett to restore a portion of the diking district as Chinook salmon habitat, helping others to see the benefits of the project for both salmon and outdoor recreation.