

Leaping Steelhead, Delta Conservation Awards For 2007

By Dan Bacher

In 2005 I instituted a new set of fishery conservation awards, the "Leaping Steelhead" awards, for those who have gone out of their way to restore and enhance our fish populations in the face of decades of state and federal government mismanagement of California and West Coast fisheries.

Now it's time for this year's awards ceremony, featuring some new ones for Delta conservation.

2007 was another tough year for fishermen. The ocean salmon season was one of the worst on record for recreational anglers and commercial fishermen. So it was no surprise when anglers fishing the Sacramento, Feather and American Rivers experienced the worst ever fishing when the salmon moved into the rivers.

The California Delta pelagic species decline continued, with the fall midwater trawl surveys yielding record low numbers of delta smelt, longfin smelt, juvenile striped bass, splittail and American shad. Fortunately, a decision by Superior Court Judge Roesch in March and a final order issued by federal judge Oliver Wanger on December 14 finally imposed protections for Delta smelt.

On February 15, Mike Chrisman announced the formation of a 41 member "Stakeholders Panel" for the Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force. Unfortunately, not one representative from recreational anglers and California Indian Tribes, two of the groups most impacted by water decisions, was invited to the table.

After a group of us launched an action alert chastising the Governor and Resources Secretary for refusing to appoint angling or tribal representatives, the Governor finally appointed John Beuttler, conservation director of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, and Gary Mulcahy, governmental affairs director of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe. Beuttler and Mulcahy each receive the "Real Delta Visionary" award for their long, hard work on this panel.

A broad coalition of recreational fishing organizations, fishing businesses and boat and tackle manufacturers, as well as representatives of the Yurok and Karuk tribes, officially kicked off the "Water for Fish" Campaign in a press conference held on February 15 at the Fred Hall Show at the Cow Palace. To date, over 20,000 letters have been sent. Dick Pool, president of Pro-Troll, Chris Hall, president of the Coastside Fishing Club and Gordon Robertson, governmental affairs coordinator for the American Sportfishing Association, get the "Letters For Fish" award for 2007 for their efforts on behalf of Water for Fish.

One of the biggest fishery disasters of the year was when tens of thousands including thousands of stripers perished on Prospect Island in the California Delta in November. The fish kill was exposed after Bob Simms, the host of the KFBK Outdoor Radio Program, saw hundreds of small dead fish coming out of the pipe at Prospect Island, where the Bureau of Reclamation was draining the island, and placed the first call to DFG regarding the fish kill.

On the following day, Bob McDaris owner of Cliff's Marina in Freeport, and John Soto, a Delta hay farmer, got the word out to myself and other reporters after they witnessed thousands of dead fish and many more struggling to survive in shallow, muddy water on the island.

McDaris and Jeff Nash, a local angler, coordinated a big group of anglers to rescue the fish, but it took over 10 days for approval from the DFG and Bureau of Reclamation. The anglers saved over 10,000 fish including 1831 striped bass and thousands of smaller fish including bluegill, Sacramento blackfish and other species. For their efforts in the face of government indifference, McDaris, Simms, Soto, Nash and all of the volunteers who helped save fish receive the "Big, Healthy Striper" awards.

Jim Martin, West Coast Regional Director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance, in November made a Freedom of Information Act request of the Bureau to release its correspondence and emails regarding the events that led to the fish kill. For this action and his constant monitoring of the Fish and Game Commission, PFMC and other governmental bodies, Martin is bestowed the "Fish Investigator" of 2007 award.

Speaking of information, Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations (PCFFA) and staff regularly compile the invaluable "Fish & Oceans file," a compilation of news clips, announcements, releases and other information regarding fish conservation, science and politics. Though the information, sent out to an extensive email list, focuses on the West Coast, it features lots of interesting articles, including some offbeat and humorous commentaries, about fisheries throughout the world. Grader and his organization get the "Fish Clipper" award for their consistent efforts to inform fishing groups, environmental groups and the public about the latest developments in the fishing world.

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, confirming the worst fears of fishing and environmental groups, on June 14 called for the construction of a peripheral canal around the Delta and the building of more dams at a town meeting in Bakersfield. Fishing and environmental organizations responded with strong opposition to his campaign for a canal.

Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, Restore the Delta campaign coordinator, was a key leader in anti-canal efforts by issuing regular "Delta Flows" updates pointing out how a canal and increased exports weren't the answer to the Delta's problems. She convened a number of forums on the Delta, including superb

presentations by Mark Franco, headman of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, and Dante Nomellini, a water rights attorney and Delta farmer, in opposition to the canal. For her great activism, she receives the "Stop the Peripheral Canal" award.

She also gets the best "Fish Quote" prize for her description of the "Green Governor." "Schwarzenegger is as green as a silk plant," quipped Barrigan-Parrilla. "When you get up close, you realize that is all a big fake."

Litigation was name of the game in 2007, with Michael Lozeau, environmental attorney and former executive director of the Baykeeper, and Michael Jackson, CSPA attorney, filing a successful lawsuit against the Department of Fish and Game and California Department of Water Resources for failing to get a "incidental take permit" from the DFG for killing Delta smelt, winter run chinook salmon and spring run chinook under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA).

In a monumental victory for anglers and conservationists, Alameda Superior Court Judge Frank Roesch on March 22 ordered the State Department of Water Resources to shut down the state's water export pumps in the South Delta during the migration of Delta smelt. After a long delay, DWR on May 31 finally announced it would temporarily stop pumping at State Water Project (SWP) facilities in the Delta to provide "maximum protection" for Delta smelt. For this big victory and their relentless litigation against the biggest killers of the state's fish, the state and federal governments, Lozeau and Jackson are bestowed the "Lawyers for the Fish" award.

The year was a big one in the state legislature, where Governor Schwarzenegger called a special session in September to pass his dam and peripheral canal water bond proposal. Fortunately, Senator Pro-Temp Don Perata offered an alternative water bond, supported by environmentalists, the Winnemem Wintu and fishing groups, that didn't include the canal and required water agencies to fund part of the costs new water storage facilities.

Mindy McIntire, water program manager for the Planning and Conservation League, and Steve Evans, conservation director of Friends of the River, receive the first annual "Eyes on the Legislature" award for consistently alerting the environmental and fishing communities with good analysis and information regarding legislation impacting our fisheries.

Bill Jennings, executive director of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, receives the "Delta Watchdog" award for his consistent hammering of the DFG, DWR and Bureau of Reclamation for destruction of our fish resources. Jennings called the mainstream media to task for concentrating on the two wayward humpback whales, Delta and Dawn, while the Delta smelt numbers in the DFG spring survey reached a record low. A widely circulated action alert by Jennings eventually resulted in a lot of coverage by TV, newspaper and radio coverage of the plight of the smelt and other fish.

Anglers received a great Christmas present when Judge Oliver Wanger of the U.S. District Court in Fresno issued his final written order to protect the smelt and the Bay-Delta Estuary ecosystem from being further degraded by fresh water diversions. Trent Orr, Earthjustice lawyer filed this initial lawsuit on behalf of NRDC, Friends of the River, California Trout, The Bay Institute and the Baykeeper. Orr and Kate Poole, NRDC attorney, and the other four groups get the "Delta Smelt" award for their successful litigation.

There is no group that has been more in the trenches on the battle to save the Delta than the California Striped Bass Association. Their members collected thousands of signatures on Water for Fish petitions at the ISE Sports shows and the ASA Fred Hall show in 2007. They also showed up at every legislative hearing, protest and meeting regarding the Delta, including Lois Wolk's Prospect Island hearing, with a sizable contingent of members. For this reason, Gary Adams, president of the CSBA, and the organization's entire membership are given the "Save the Delta" award.

The battle to restore the Klamath River system raged on with the campaign to remove the dams and the ongoing settlement negotiations making the headlines. The Yurok, Karuk and Hoopa Valley tribes and fishermen capped off a historic cross-country pilgrimage to Omaha, Neb., on May 5 with a protest outside the shareholders meeting of Warren Buffett's Berkshire-Hathaway Corporation.

They demanded the removal of four Klamath Dams owned by Berkshire subsidiary PacifiCorp that are largely responsible for the decades-long decline of salmon, steelhead and other species on the Klamath River. Although Buffett never met with the tribes, two members of the coalition, Wendy George, council member of the Hoopa Valley Tribe, and Ronnie Pellegrini, wife of a commercial salmon fisherman, were able to ask questions directly to Buffett and his partner Charles Munger before a crowd of 27,000 shareholders.

Members of the cross-country caravan transported two handcrafted 20-foot long redwood log dugout canoes used in the ceremonies of the Yurok Tribe to Omaha. Four members of the Karuk Tribe, "world renewal" priests (fateveenan) Chook Chook Hillman, Ike Hillman, Cogie McCovey and Codie Donahue, also went on a nine-day fast to "cleanse themselves" and protect them on their journey. Regina Chichizola, the Klamath Riverkeeper, provided extensive support for the trip, including taking many great photos of the salmon bake and protest at the shareholders meeting.

For their leadership and participation in this unique protest, George, Pellegrini, the Hillman brothers, McCovey, Donahue, the Klamath Riverkeeper and the Karuk, Yurok and Hoopa Valley Tribes receive the "Leaping Steelhead" award for 2007.

The Alameda Creek Alliance, a coalition of anglers and environmentalists committed to restoring salmon and steelhead to this East Bay stream, celebrated its tenth anniversary on August 24, 2007. Due to the alliance's 10 years of political pressure, four public agencies are moving forward quickly with five stream restoration projects that will help restore steelhead and salmon to the creek. For their grassroots work to restore this creek, Jeff Miller, executive director of the Alliance, and all of its volunteers receive the "Urban Steelhead" award.

Finally, in response to a looming crisis over the lack of federal Sport Fish Restoration funds to plant kokanee salmon in California lakes, the presidents of Kokanee Power and the California Inland Fisheries Foundation, Inc, (CIFFI) this fall pledged their financial support to the California Department of Fish and Game to address a shortfall in funds. Nelson Money, CIFFI president, and Gary Coe, Kokanee Power president, are given the first-ever "Giant Kokanee" award.