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Conservation Leaders in Comal and Guadalupe Counties Recognized at Awards Banquet

Spring Branch, July 28, 2008 – Love of the land and protecting it was evident in the seven conservation leaders who were recognized Tuesday, July 15 at the annual Comal-Guadalupe Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) Awards Banquet.

Each year outstanding conservationists within the Comal-Guadalupe SWCD are nominated by their peers for consideration. The nominees have to be district members with a conservation plan through the SWCD/USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and conservation practices in place. The 2008 award winners are:

The **Conservation Farmers** are Ernest Hartman Jr. “Junior” and his son, Trey Hartman, who have been farming in Guadalupe County all their lives and grow corn, wheat and sorghum. They also have acreage in improved and native grasses along with oats for grazing the more than 140 head of cattle on the farm. The Hartmans have diversified their farming operation to include hay baling and custom farming. Using minimum, strip and no-till cropping systems which improve soil quality and reduce erosion, both Junior and Trey foresee updating their farming operation to using satellite-auto steer tractors and machinery in the near future – trading in their 16-row equipment for something easier to handle. Family is important to the Hartmans with four generations living within a stones throw of each other and everyone involved in agriculture in some form or fashion. Trey is also an up and coming community leader, serving as a board member for the Guadalupe County Farm Bureau.

“We are doing what comes naturally, you don’t bite the hand that feeds you,” said Junior Hartman. “Old timer used to say, ‘Treat every acre like it’s the only one you got,’ and we work hard to take care of the land because it takes care of us.”

The **Conservation Rancher** is Sid Mercer, who grew up on a small ranch in Yancey and was involved in 4-H and FFA, learning about conservation, farming and ranching from the many knowledgeable people who touched his life. After obtaining a Bachelor of Science degree in Range Management from Stephen F. Austin State University, Sid started working with the USDA – Farmers Home Administration, which used his expertise and learned life lessons.

Sid has owned and operated farmland in Medina, Gillespie and Guadalupe counties, along with his wife, Linda, and their two sons, Doug and David. Their ranch in Guadalupe County is divided into six pastures for rotational grazing of their 130 head of Brangus cows. They have 220 acres in improved grasses of Tifton 85 and coastal Bermuda grass. The ranch has been sculptured to provide for wildlife, cattle, and recreation. Pastures are fertilized and sprayed with herbicides according to needs and results of soil tests taken on a regular basis. Invasive brush species, like mesquite, are spot treated yearly in the improved pasture.

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“Sid’s place is a site to behold, showing what stewardship and carrying out good conservation management practices can do for a ranch,” said NRCS civil engineering technician, Butch Rehfeld. “Sid’s philosophy on conservation is to return more to the soil than you take out.”

The **Absentee Conservation Farmer** is Joyce (Gass) Moore, a sixth generation landowner who today continues the tradition of her hardy German ancestors, who settled in far western Comal County, along the banks of Honey Creek in 1846. Joyce handles the Honey Creek Spring Ranch from her home Harper in Gillespie County, where she works for Texas Parks and Wildlife, specializing in private lands assistance. Trained by her parents, Anita (Kunz) Gass and the late Johnny Gass, and aided by her late husband, Johnny Moore, she was raised to “work until last light.” Today, Moore along with her mother, sister, Cindy (Gass) Martinez, and 7-year old son, Josh Tatum, operate the property as a Family Limited Partnership.

“I’ve been involved in ranching since I was old enough to drive a tractor, sack wool, or sling a sack of range cubes,” said Joyce. “It’s a way of life I cherish and hope to pass on to my son – a way of life I see disappearing in this part of the Hill Country.”

Named for the perennial spring and cavern system which originates from the Karst limestone hills, Honey Creek Spring Ranch continues to provide an important watershed nourishing the Guadalupe River system. Still in recovery following many years of sheep/goat overuse, Joyce conservatively stocks cow/calf operation and has implemented a six pasture deferred rotational grazing system with the intent to heal the land. Prescribed burns are conducted when weather and fuel loads allow, and mechanical manipulation of the Ashe Juniper regrowth targets improved vegetative diversity. Much of this work has been completed through various USDA-NRCS cost-assistance programs including the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and the state Brush Control Program.

The Outstanding **Conservation Homemaker** is Dolores Schumann, who learned a love of the land from an early age, as she told the audience when she accepted her award. “When I was six, I picked cotton. Some people would call it child abuse, but I called it learning.”

Conservation has been a part of Schumann’s life from her childhood on a dairy farm in Schulenburg where she credits her parents, Willie and Albina Zapalac, for teaching her about conservation practices on the farm. Her parents always told her that working with the Soil and Water Conservation Service was the best investment they ever made; carrying out such practices as terracing, crop rotation and building stock ponds on their farm.

She also credited her success and ability to do the conservation work to her husband, Bill Schumann, with whom she purchased her family’s farm, dairy cattle and equipment, and they have worked with the Fayette County Soil and Water Conservation District on numerous occasions.

Dolores’s projects include leading the “Friends for the Preservation of Historic Landa Park” and she was instrumental in having Landa Park formally designated as an Arboretum, or as it is commonly called, “A Living Library of Trees.”

Currently, her top priority is to keep the City of New Braunfels from constructing a thoroughfare through or over Landa Park and the Comal Springs, which are vital to New Braunfels, Seguin, Victoria and the estuaries in the Gulf of Mexico. Another mission is to restore the historic Landa Park, where erosion and soil compaction is killing the trees and the lack of water has eliminated much of the grass cover.

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The Outstanding **Conservation Teacher of the Year** is Leigh Slaughter, who is a 5th grade science teacher at Barbara Jordon Intermediate School in Schertz. Leigh is a natural when it comes to promoting conservation and preserving natural resources. From her childhood days of wondering why people would throw their trash in the pristine Guadalupe River to helping with recycling programs during her school years, Leigh followed her passion and earned a Bachelor's degree in Agricultural Systems Management with an emphasis in Natural Resources from Texas A&M. She is currently working on her Masters degree in Rangeland Ecology and Management. Leigh interned and worked for the NRCS for three years, where she loved teaching people about conservation, especially the children, using the rainfall simulator to show them how rain can cause erosion on bare soil and how important soil and natural resources are to us all.

Leigh and her husband, Matt Slaughter, have put their knowledge to use on their ranch between New Braunfels and Seguin, conducting soil tests before they fertilize for their hay, pasture rotation and grazing for their horses and making improvements for wildlife.

Teaching by example, Leigh implemented a recycling program to dispose of paper waste at Jordon Intermediate where she is in her fourth year of teaching science. This fall she plans to have her classes propose to the school district to purchase biodegradable lunch trays to replace the Styrofoam trays they currently use. Her classes also work with the local Master Naturalists to convert the school courtyard to a xeriscape area to conserve water. She also organized the first annual "Science Day" at the school, where 420 students were able to see, hear and observe demonstrations on conservation, energy, water quality, and wildlife.

Recognized for **Promoting Conservation in Youth** were Wilfred and Betty Lou Bartoskewitz, originators and owners of the Texas Agricultural Education and Heritage Center in Seguin. When the couple saw what was happening to the rural landscape, they built the "Big Red Barn" and turned the family's 35 acres of working farmland into an educational center to teach young people about the importance of agriculture in our everyday lives.

Approximately 2,800 school age children and about 8,000 adults tour the Center each year learning about agricultural and the rural way of life. The Bartoskewitz and the nine-member board work with cooperating groups such as USDA-NRCS, Guadalupe County Master Gardeners, Farm Bureau, Guadalupe Blanco River Authority, Guadalupe Valley Electric Co-Op and many others to maintain and change out the displays regularly.

Their calendar is full of events with a Rural Heritage Day the first weekend in June where participants relive the heritage and culture with a tour of the rural village set up on the property. Then in October an Agricultural Awareness Fair is held for two weeks where students from Guadalupe and surrounding counties learn from real farmers and ranchers about agriculture, see live demonstrations, learn farm safety and enjoy hands-on activities. The third weekend in December, a Country Christmas is held where the whole family can enjoy the festivities of the season while learning about agriculture.

Ewald Tractor Company in Seguin and John Ewald, owner since 1999, was this year's choice for the **Business/Professional Person** award. This year marks 60 years of dedicated service to the local area and the conservation efforts of local farmers, ranchers and the Comal-Guadalupe SWCD.

Customer and employee loyalty are what John contributes to his continued success with Ewald Tractor Co. In 2000, the business grew under his guidance to include stores in Floresville and Boerne and increased his employee numbers up to 50 devoted staffers, many of whom have worked for Ewald for more than 20 years.

Conservation Farmer of the Year, Junior Hartman, credits Ewald's great uncle, Red Ewald, with getting their family started in farming. Junior's great grandfather, E.W. Hartman, bought his first tractor, a 1948 Ford, from Ewald and made weekly payments until he went in one day and Ewald told him he could take the tractor home. He didn't have a way to get the tractor home and Ewald gave him a red tow bar and the Hartmans still have the tow bar that brought the first tractor to the family farm.

More than 90 landowners and their family and friends attended the banquet held at the Knibbe Ranch in Spring Branch and were given a hayride tour of ranch by Sharon and Chuck Knibbe. The tour group learned about the historical homestead and also about the Knibbes participation in the Guadalupe River Water Enhancement Project. The Knibbes are one of five landowners in the area that are removing cedar to improve the natural flow of water into Spring Branch Creek which flows into the Guadalupe River. Since the brush removal only started a few months ago and the lack of rain, the Knibbes have not yet seen the spring's water flow increase, but have seen the spring's flow decrease over the years as the mesquite brush has increased on the ranch. After the tour, attendees were treated to a barbeque dinner and dutch oven pies by the SWCD Directors and the Zipp Creek Cattle Company.

For more information about the Comal-Guadalupe SWCD awards program or conservation programs offered through the district and the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), call (830) 379-0930 ext. 3.

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