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Pamlico Realtor Wins Pelican Award From N.C. Coastal Federation

OCEAN - A Realtor in Oriental received a 2014 Pelican Award from the N.C. Coastal Federation for his outspoken opposition to plans to turn thousands of acres of wetlands in Pamlico County to farmland.

Because of Allen Propst, hundreds of people in the county wrote letters and emails to county officials and attended county commission meetings to oppose the plans. That opposition has triggered a federal investigation into possible violations of wetland laws.

"The vast wetlands of Pamlico County could not have a better friend than Allen," noted Todd Miller, the federation's founder and executive director.

Propst is one of 15 recipients of Pelican Awards this year. The annual award recognizes the exemplary work of people, organizations and groups to protect and enhance the N.C. coast. Other winners along the central coast are: the Episcopal Church's Trinity Center and its environmental educators for installing a "living shoreline" at its retreat and conference center in Pine Knoll Shores in Carteret County; Craig Hardy of Morehead City who is retiring from the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries after 30 years of restoring oyster habitat; and volunteer Bill Hettler for his careful maintenance of the nature trails at the federation's Hoop Pole Creek Preserve in Atlantic Beach.

All will receive the awards Saturday at a luncheon at the N.C. Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores in Carteret County.

Propst has lived in Pamlico County since 1977. He owns Mariner Realty and is past president of the county's Board of Realtors and the Oriental Rotary Club. Given that background, many people listened last fall when Propst spoke out publicly against plans to convert nearly 4,600 acres of forested wetlands to agricultural land. Hundreds of people wrote the county commissioners or attended meetings. The commissioners demanded that federal agencies step in to protect the wetland, and the EPA started an enforcement action.

"Allen raised the alarm at the same time the EPA reported that wetland losses in the country occur at a rate of seven football fields each hour," Miller said. "He showed that much of this loss happens because regulatory safeguards for wetlands are not enforced."

The Trinity Center is a retreat, worship and environmental education center of the Episcopal Church's Diocese of East Carolina. Numerous storms, particularly Hurricane Irene in 2011 and Hurricane Sandy the following year, significantly eroded the center's shoreline at Sanders Point, its cherished landmark and worship area on Bogue Sound.

Worried about losing their shoreline, the center originally planned in 2013 to install a vinyl bulkhead. Environmental educators in the center's Sound to Sea program recognized, though, that the bulkhead would eventually destroy the valuable salt marsh and oyster habitat that they teach about.

"They went above and beyond their job responsibilities and were determined to find a more environmentally-friendly alternative," Miller said.

The educators contacted the federation, which suggested a "living shoreline" as an alternative. Such an approach uses more natural techniques and strategies to control erosion. The educators persuaded the center to pursue a sill made of oyster shells with planted marsh grasses behind it. With the federation's help, the educators received the required state permit, obtained the recycled oyster shells and bagged and placed them along the shoreline. They also planted thousands of plugs of marsh grass.

Hardy will retire early next year as the chief of the habitat and enhancement section at Division of Marine Fisheries. He has championed the restoration of oysters in the state and has taken a hands-on approach to shaping and directing the division's oyster enhancement and restoration program. Hardy started the state's award-winning shell recycling program and oversaw the expansion and implementation of the oyster sanctuary program.

"He is a leader in recognizing that while oysters are a very important fishery, they are equally important as habitat and water filters," Miller said. "He's always willing to work with anyone who has a good idea. We will miss his guidance."

Hettler began volunteering with the federation in 2011, spending much of his time bagging oyster shells and planting salt marsh grass for habitat restoration projects at Jones Island in the White Oak River. That same year, he became the trail steward for the Hoop Pole Creek Nature Preserve in Atlantic Beach, maintaining the trail for hundreds of visitors to enjoy annually. He's also helped with the annual Hoop Pole Creek clean-up and the federation's Native Plant Sale. Since he began volunteering, Bill has donated more than 175 hours of his time to support the federation.

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About the North Carolina Coastal Federation:

"Working Together for a Healthy Coast"

The N.C. Coastal Federation is the state's only non-profit organization focused exclusively on protecting and restoring the coast of North Carolina through education, advocacy and habitat restoration and preservation. The federation's headquarters are at 3609 N.C. 24 in Ocean between Morehead City and Swansboro and the office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. The federation also operates field offices in Wrightsville Beach and Manteo. For more information call 252.393.8185 or check our website at www.nccoast.org.

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