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U.S. Department of Interior Recognizes National Public Lands Day And its Sponsor, Toyota Motor Sales, with “Take Pride in America” Awards

Washington, D.C., Sept. 30, 2005 – National Public Lands Day and its sponsor, Toyota Motor Sales, USA, Inc., have won national awards from the U.S. Department of Interior’s “Take Pride in America” partnership program, which recognized the event as the largest hands-on volunteer event of its kind and cited Toyota’s “exemplary donation of time, finances, and volunteers.”

U.S. Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton presented the leaders of National Public Lands Day with one of three “Federal Land Manager Awards” that a panel of judges awarded to non-profit partners, at a ceremony today at Interior headquarters, after a White House reception last night.

The award was accepted by Diane W. Wood, president of the National Environmental Education & Training Foundation, where National Public Lands Day is housed, and Robb Hampton, the program’s director. Hampton took advantage of the moment to call for new sites in 2006, especially on state and local lands, where the program is experiencing rapid growth.

Norton also presented an award to Toyota Motor Sales, USA, Inc., which has supported National Public Lands Day financially for seven years, hosted 28 volunteer projects on sites nationwide, and encouraged 2,000 of its employees who participate, as an expression of the company’s top-to-bottom environmental commitment. Martha Voss, national public affairs manager, accepted the award on behalf of the company.

Each year National Public Lands Day is held on the last Saturday of September. Last weekend, the 12th annual event brought some 90,000 volunteers to 800 sites all over America, from spectacular national landmarks to local city parks, to donate a day to fixing up the one-third of America that is publicly owned. This year’s event had a brand-new mission: to help fill in for public agency workers sent to the Hurricane Katrina and Rita relief efforts.

“Our program celebrates the incredible diversity of public lands that Americans get to enjoy, and asks everyone to consider donating one day out of 365 to helping keep them up,” Hampton said in accepting the award. Volunteers at Whiskeytown National Recreation Area, near Redding, Calif., for example, helped build a hiking trail to a 400-foot-tall waterfall deep in the wilderness that was discovered only last month. Other volunteers across the country picked up trash, combated invasive weeds, and replaced them with native plants more favored by wildlife.

“Now we’d like to find new volunteers who have favorite places that are owned by states and localities, which could use the massive fix-up effort that this day makes possible,” Hampton said. In 2004, NPLD volunteers removed over 285,000 pounds of trash, improved 400 miles of trails, built 30 bridges, removed over 6,000 pounds of invasive plants, and planted over 35,000 native trees and plants. (Statistics are still being collected for the 2005 event last week.)

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Hampton spent the final two weeks before this year's event in a recruitment push that involved driving the length of California in a 55-mpg hybrid Toyota Prius wrapped with promotional graphics, meeting with local groups, handing out grants, and answering questions about how the hybrid car saves gas and cuts pollution.

Toyota encouraged its 34,000 employees nationwide to participate at numerous locations, such as at Seal Beach National Wildlife Refuge on the California coast, in the midst of greater Los Angeles, where invasive weeds were replaced by native flowers, shrubs, and grasses to create shelter for endangered wetland birds. It also donated four Prius cars to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, a site where cutting air pollution is especially important, for use by its volunteers.

In addition to National Public Lands Day, the other non-profits which won Take Pride in America awards this year were the Continental Divide Trail Alliance in the Western U.S., and the Morris Land Conservancy's Partners for Parks program in Northern New Jersey. Both organizations participated on National Public Lands Day, as well. The panel of 14 judges included high-ranking staff members at several federal agencies.

Managers and volunteers on public lands who are interested in becoming a site coordinator for National Public Lands Day 2006 can obtain more information by calling toll-free 800-VOL-TEER (800-865-8337), or going to www.publiclandsday.org. All public lands are eligible. The website offers downloadable photos and more information for the news media, as well.

Toyota's sponsorship of National Public Lands Day for the seventh straight year is guided by its Global Earth Charter, a comprehensive effort to promote conservation activities and protect the environment in all stages of the company's operation. The Toyota Prius, rated at 55 mpg by EPA, is the benchmark of gas/electric hybrid vehicles and is 90 percent cleaner for smog-forming emissions than the average vehicle. The company is introducing two hybrid SUVs this year -- the Lexus 400h and the Toyota Highlander Hybrid. Toyota obtained Gold LEED certification from the U.S. Green Building Council for a new office complex at its headquarters in Torrance, Calif.

Participants include sites run by the Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Defense Department, Environmental Protection Agency, National Forest Service, National Park Service, Tennessee Valley Authority, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, numerous state and local agencies participate, as well as nonprofit groups such as the National Parks Conservation Association, International Mountain Bicycling Association, Boy Scouts of America, and Girl Scouts of the USA.

The event is managed by the National Environmental Education & Training Foundation (NEETF), chartered by Congress in 1990 as a private nonprofit organization to develop and support environmental learning programs to meet social goals and build partnerships among government, the private sector and non- governmental organizations. See www.neetf.org for more information.

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