



2025

Award Categories

Western AIS Leader: This award shall be given to a professional individual/agency/organization that is leading the West on AIS issues. Individuals who have gone above and beyond advancing AIS prevention, early detection, management education or coordination forward in addressing Western AIS issues.

Best in the West: Awards shall be given to individuals who exhibit outstanding contributions to AIS management in their commitment to management who exhibit dedication, passion and commitment to addressing AIS issues. Outstanding interactions with the public, innovative and creative ways to address AIS issues, leadership that helps protect western waters, and doing more with less. These individuals make AIS operations the best they can be working on watercraft inspection, early detection, laboratory tasks, management and outreach.

Wester AIS Leader 2025

Robert Walters: There are few individuals in the AIS world that are as involved, impactful and effective as Robert Walters with Colorado Parks and Wildlife. In addition to managing a state-wide AIS program, responding to multiple mussel detections, initiating eradication treatments, leading an EDRR response on bighead carp, managing staff, coordinating with partners, managing the WID database, serving as vice chair on WRP, leading the Decon Think Tank, leading innovation in decontamination technology and building a program that is an example for other states to follow. He has accomplished all these things with a calm, intelligent and articulate “Zen master” approach. We are fortunate to have Robert as part of our AIS Team in the West.



Best in the West 2025 Awardees

Colleen Allen: Colleen Allen with the National Park Service are the Best in the West for their outstanding contributions to aquatic invasive species prevention! Through their collaborative efforts and leadership to decontaminate fire gear and equipment including water trucks and hoses used in response to the White Sage and Dragon Bravo fires currently burning in Arizona, they have helped protect western waters from the unintentional spread of quagga mussels found in the Colorado River. Over 35 fire trucks and tactical water tenders from more than eight western states have been used to respond to the ongoing Dragon Bravo Fire and White Sage Fire that have to date burned approximately 200,000 acres in Arizona. Given their expertise with Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) planning, Colleen recognized the risk to western waters as these out-of-state crews would return home. Gear and equipment used for fire suppression with water from the Colorado River could spread invasive quagga mussel veligers when that gear and equipment returned to their respective locations. To prevent further quagga mussel spread, Colleen was able to quickly mobilize with federal National Park Service decontamination equipment and leverage other support from local city, county, and state agencies including Arizona Game and Fish, and Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. In addition to leading decontamination efforts, Colleen have helped educate fire response staff about the safest ways to reduce and mitigate the risk from water contaminated with invasive mussel veligers as part of fire response. Colleen has truly made outstanding contributions to aquatic invasive species prevention by their personal commitments to mobilize during this emergency response. They have dedicated countless hours to keep western waters safe.



Quetzal Elmore: Quetzal Elmore is the Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Field Supervisor at Glen Canyon National Recreation Area (GLCA), AKA Lake Powell. For several years Quetzal has worked tirelessly dedicating himself to his position and implementing the field operations of the quagga mussel containment program that helps to protect the west. His work with NPS staff and the states of Utah, Arizona and local partners to prevent the spread of Dreissenid mussels to other waters is remarkable. He shows substantial flexibility in a swiftly moving complex atmosphere of boaters, changing lake levels, concessionaires, etc. Despite extreme challenges in not only the NPS but states varying staff numbers, multiple duty locations with different laws and regulations, difficult boaters and commercial operations, not to mention “floating mussels”, Quetzal continues to lead and hold together an impressive and successful containment program in partnership with Utah and Arizona. Quetzal's dedication in not only the recreational containment world but in the parks operational containment realm of implementing Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles in all park operations, research permits, and construction contracts have been key to park prevention and containment efforts.



Most recently his work with the fire community to build an understanding and gain voluntary compliance from the White Sage and Dragon Bravo fire crews has been notable. Quetzals unwavering efforts are far above normal and show much success in achieving the overall goal of the AIS containment program. Quetzal is very talented and creative in thinking "out of the box." He continues to be exceedingly effective and highly successful in working with ALL partners, in communications at all levels, both within GLCA and across the USA.

Ham Hamilton: FWP Region 1 Watercraft Inspector: Ham is a marine. Once a Marine, always a Marine. He has applied the same focus and dedication to the AIS issue in Montana and has led the watercraft inspection effort the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Kalispell office for over 8 years. He is thorough, passionate and is dedicated to quality customer service for the public. His energy and passion is contagious and after 10 minutes with Ham, you will never forget to Clean Drain Dry every time.



Rob Howard: Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes AIS Program Manager: Rob currently manages the watercraft inspection stations for CSKT and has worked at inspection stations for years prior to that. He provides exceptional leadership for staff and leads by example. He approaches every boater with a smile, even when they are upset and uncooperative. His approach to quality and complete inspections along with excellent customer service distinguishes him as one of the best AIS prevention professionals in the business. His attitude is contagious and his commitment to the issue has helped build better inspectors and a stronger AIS program for Montana.



Jeff Kemp: Swan Lakers Board President, Jeff Kemp has served on the Swan Lakers board for nearly 15 years and was recently re-elected board president of the Swan Lakers for which he has served for seven of the last ten years. In addition to heading our organization, Jeff has been the Swan watershed leader in the battle against AIS, in particular the dreaded zebra and quagga mussels. Now in its eleventh season, Jeff established and leads the Swan Lakers volunteer AIS boat inspection program at Swan Lake's one public boat ramp, which is on USFS property. Jeff has devoted countless hours every year towards all things AIS.



Jennifer Murray: Jennifer with Colorado Parks and Wildlife is recognized for her outstanding dedication, passion, and commitment to addressing Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) issues. Jennifer's support of the regional watercraft inspection and decontamination (WID) virtual trainings have been instrumental in strengthening communication, collaboration, and the overall capacity of staff and partners to protect western waters. Jennifer demonstrated remarkable leadership while participating in the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission's (PSMFC) WID training. She attended Level 1 and Level 2 classes in 2024-2025 and provided an overview and live demonstration of the WID Mobile App and Data Sharing System. Her essential knowledge, skills, and energy empowered inspectors, decontamination staff, and managers to engage in the system. Her ability to organize, communicate, and solve problems during the training created a highly engaging and effective environment. Jennifer never said no to a request for training. She attended and taught virtual classes on her days off, while traveling for CPW, while working at inspection stations she manages, and even when she had her own training happening at the same time. She was always smiling and excited to be with us on zoom, showcasing herself as an exemplary leader in western AIS efforts for others to aspire to. Her efforts reflect an exceptional commitment to collaboration and outreach. Her positive attitude and ability to connect with others inspire both her colleagues and the broader AIS community. By going above and beyond her core responsibilities at CPW and lending her expertise to the international PSMFC training program, Jennifer has had a measurable impact on AIS operations across the continent.



Kyle Oxley: Kyle Oxley has been an ANS Biologist for a little over a year with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. In this short time, Kyle has demonstrated a passion and unmatched work ethic to protect North Dakota waters from Aquatic Invasive Species introductions. As an ANS Biologist, Kyle oversees the planning and implementation of zebra mussel and aquatic vegetation early detection efforts in western North Dakota. While not on the water, Kyle directly oversees watercraft inspectors at 3 different locations and helps coordinate statewide efforts. He has developed relationships with local water stakeholders giving presentations/trainings and distributing education/citizen science materials to raise AIS awareness in North Dakota. You name it, Kyle's done it, including hatchery inspections, installing CD3 waysides, pet store checks, bait vendor visits, the list goes on and on! Finally, when Kyle is finished with his 50+ hour work week, he returns to the office and is rewarded by sitting down in the lab, looking in a microscope, and slowly chipping away at the ~1000 Plankton tow net samples his crew collected throughout the season. Kyle is a Swiss army knife and is heavily involved in AIS prevention, education and early detection in North Dakota. He is unequivocally one of the best in the west.



Cindy Sawchuck: Cindy leads the Alberta Conservation K-9 Unit, the first of its kind in Canada, established in 2015. This program uses specially trained dogs to detect invasive zebra and quagga mussels, which pose a significant threat to Alberta's aquatic ecosystems and has leveraged other targets to support invasive species efforts more broadly. Under Cindy's leadership, the K-9 unit has successfully supported numerous instances of invasive mussels' detections beyond Alberta. The dogs' exceptional olfactory abilities allow them to pinpoint the exact location of mussels, which is crucial for prevention under early detection. Cindy's work extends beyond detection. She actively educates the public and other stakeholders about the importance of preventing the spread of invasive species. Her efforts raise awareness and promote conservation practices especially with the support of her K9. Cindy and K9 Hilo have been showcased in books, documentaries and so many more avenues of exposure. Cindy's dedication to conservation and her passion for working with detection dogs are evident in her daily efforts. She has trained and worked with multiple dogs as lead handler, ensuring AIS programs are highly effective in their roles.



Martha Volkoff: Martha is the Invasive Species Program Manager with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. When golden mussels were discovered, the western partnership was eager for information. Martha and her team at CDFW worked tirelessly to provide updates to the partnership, she was available at a moment's notice to provide the latest information on a dynamic situation. She presented anywhere and everywhere all in the spirit of partnership and collaboration. Martha's dedication and hard work are more than deserving of the Best in the West award.



Team AIS Montana: Montana has an outstanding group of people that are involved with AIS prevention, early detection and outreach state-wide. This includes a great group of passionate and dedicated staff at Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks who promote partnerships, consistency and coordination across the state. Other members of Team AIS Montana include the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the Blackfeet Nation, the Little Shell of the Chippewa Tribe, Missoula County, the Lincoln, Beaverhead, Garfield, McCone, Bighorn and Powder River Conservation Districts, the City of Whitefish, the Whitefish Lake Institute, the Western Montana Conservation Commission, other state and federal partners, the Flathead Biological Station, the Yaak Valley Forest Council, the Clearwater Resource Council, Grow WILD, Flathead Lakers, Trout Unlimited, Walleyes



Unlimited, Pikemasters, Fishing Outfitters Association of Montana, the Central and Eastern Montana Invasive Species Team, and many other groups around the state. The interest and involvement of partners in the AIS issue in Montana is extensive and helps ensure the most coordinated and effective program possible.