



Award Recipients 2026

Award Category: Best in the West

Dan Oler – Utah Department of Natural Resources

Nominated by: Bruce Johnson

Daniel Oler is the complete AIS employee, supervisor, and resource protector. Daniel has been and continues to participate on the Decon Think Tank. Daniels's experience and knowledge is irreplaceable. Daniel is always increasing his knowledge and experience with watercraft. Daniel takes every opportunity to meet with boating manufacturers and sales reps. Daniel works hard to develop those relationships to match his field experience with their engineering. This allows for some better designs from boat manufacturers. Daniel met with a lead design engineer from Yamaha at our Utah Lake diptank.

Daniel is constantly working with his staff and staff members across the state. Daniel provides some of the best guidance and mentoring bar none. Daniel is respected by all of our full-time AIS Staff, AIS seasonal staff, and our other agency personnel. Daniel will receive consultation phone calls from other sections in other parts of the state due to his great personality and reputation. Daniel has always worked with allied agencies across the state. Daniel oversees, trains and mentors (4) State Parks with about 30 seasonal staff. Daniel directly supervises 20-25 seasonals at 6 locations. Daniel's area was responsible for 40,589 inspections and 1,128 decontaminations this calendar year. I have previous work experience working with Daniel in our Central Regional Office. The compliments continued long after I left the region and from many other agencies than I knew at that time.



Daniel has been the state's lead AIS Instructor. Daniel continues to lead our training and onboarding protocols. Daniel is incredibly efficient. Daniel has worked hard to develop himself and others. Daniel is well respected by the state's Boating Coordinator Ty Hunter. Ty Hunter specifically asked to involve Daniel in our state's transition for the Boating Education and Mussel Aware Courses. Daniel Oler is also known beyond the United States. Daniel Oler was consulted by the Canadian Province of Alberta and the country of New Zealand.

Daniel has been a leader for our program through many advances. We have looked to Daniel's leadership through good times, COVID, new technology, diptanks, and lack of staffing. Daniel is definitely BEST OF THE WEST!!

Sara Ricklefs – Invasive Species Action Network (ISAN)

Nominated by: Jennifer Riddle, Erin Bjorklund, and Leah Elwell.

In the last four years, Sara has solidified herself as a role model for colleagues and an ambassador for the entire AIS community along the way. One of Sara's greatest strengths is her ability to connect with people. She once shared with me when she was just starting at ISAN that public outreach was the aspect of the job that made her the most nervous. Yet she is one of the most effective science communicators I have ever met! She has a natural ability to translate broad invasive species issues into messages that resonate with diverse audiences and inspire action. Whether she's talking to a group of middle school students in Kansas about New Zealand Mudsna



about New Zealand Mudsna

generational ranchers in Montana about saltcedar, I've seen her make people feel welcome, heard, and empowered to be part of the solution over and over again. These skills have made her particularly qualified to serve in her current role as coordinator of the WRP's Education & Outreach committee. In this role, she has already made strides to overcome some long-standing hurdles in AIS outreach, including facilitating discussions on consistent multilingual messaging across the region and evaluating program effectiveness.

Sara is not just a leader to our organization; she is also a champion for AIS management needs across the West. Particularly over the last year, she has tirelessly advocated for the resources needed to support all aspects of AIS management within and beyond the scope of ISAN's mission. You'd be hard-pressed to find a senator West of the Mississippi who doesn't have at least one email in their inbox from Sara encouraging support for funding that benefits the many organizations, agencies, and partnerships represented within the WRP. Her advocacy has undoubtedly helped ensure that AIS prevention and management remain priorities at both regional and national levels.

Sara's reputation precedes her. In her years since joining ISAN, she has made a name for herself as someone who simply makes things happen. She is skilled at working with fewer resources than others, she is unafraid to make organizational sacrifices to help partners, and it is evident that she takes pride in her ability to create opportunities for others to succeed. She's scrappy in the most complementary way. She is continuously opening doors for ISAN and their many partners to creative funding opportunities that would be impossible for each organization to seek individually. This is a skill I find particularly impressive at a time when it would be easier to feel defeated in the face of so much funding uncertainty. Instead, Sara energizes those around her, looks for creative workarounds, and keeps going.

Sara's passion, leadership, creativity, and advocacy have already had a lasting impact on AIS prevention and management throughout the West. She is truly an example of excellence in our field. She embodies the spirit of collaboration and service that this award seeks to recognize and is exceptionally deserving of this honor.

Scott Sterling – US Army Corps of Engineers

Nominated by: Ben Holen

I met the Plover guy (Scott Sterling), five years ago and struck up a conversation about ANS prevention and education on Lake Sakakawea. From the jump, he was intrigued by the subject and game to help where and when possible, to keep aquatic invasive species out of North Dakota's biggest (third largest reservoir in US) and most economically important lake. Fast forward 5 years and Scott Sterling is no longer the plover guy; he is known as the Bird and Bivalves guy. With his passion for the subject, Scott has helped build an ANS program on Lake Sakakawea that actively assists the State of North Dakota with ANS education, monitoring, and prevention.

Just this year (2026), Scott and staff have done/will do the following ANS activities:

- Coordinate with concessionaries around Lake Sakakawea and MHA tribe to provide ANS education material to hand out to boaters
- Collaborate with ISAN to hold special ANS educational events around the lake
- Assisted the state with finding and housing watercraft inspectors at rural accesses around Lake Sakakawea
- Assisted with the training of watercraft inspectors
- Sought money to procure/place a CD3 cleaning station at a major ramp location at Lake Sakakawea
- Collected hundreds of plankton tow net samples for invasive mussel early detection
- This past winter, he purchased a microscope/lab equipment and spent the winter training with NDGF to learn to process plankton tow net samples to reduce the states workload
- Helped coordinate USFWS dive team to help with Smishek Lake eradication project
- Assisted the state with the application of EarthTecQZ at Smishek Lake
- Helped coordinate and inspect large commercial equipment involving barges, tugboats, etc., at the lake.



Scott still plays with his birds from time to time, but his work with ANS prevention, education, and monitoring is invaluable to the state of North Dakota. USACE SAK projects involvement in ANS has grown year after year and that is largely due to Scott's passion and dedication surrounding the issue. As a state with a smaller ANS program (3 FTE's) we are incredible fortunate to have adopted Scott in the ANS fight and are happy to nominate him for the best of the west award.

Doug Youngers – Colorado Parks and Wildlife

Nominated by: Robert Walters and Kayla Jensen



It is an honor to nominate Doug Youngers, WID Supervisor at Lake Pueblo State Park, for the Best in the West Award. A cornerstone of the CPW ANS Program since 2008, Doug oversees Colorado's largest WID station which performed over 63,000 inspections and 2,000 decontaminations in 2025 alone. Beyond Pueblo, Doug also contributes to CPW's ANS law Enforcement Committee, shaping regulations and procedures vital to protecting Colorado's aquatic resources.

Doug's dedication to innovation has revolutionized AIS management. He pioneered one of Colorado's first On-demand Decontamination Systems, developed custom tools to improve equipment longevity and is currently spearheading an automated gate system to balance recreational access, resource protection and fiscal responsibility. A recognized authority in complex decontamination, Doug hosted the inaugural Advanced Decontamination course in 2014 at Lake Pueblo State Park, demonstrating his technical leadership and ability to foster strong relationships with marinas and marine dealers alike.

Beyond his technical excellence, Doug is a mentor who both trains and works side-by-side with his team to inspire the next generation of environmental stewards. He models commitment to customer service and resource protection, often working early mornings and late nights, all while balancing his commitments to his family, community and church. Furthermore, his regional contributions to the Decontamination Think Tank and ABYC AIS

Summit have helped establish standards adopted regionally and nationally, extending his impact far beyond Colorado's borders.

Deeply valued in the agency and his community, Doug has embodied the spirit of the Best in the West award for nearly 20 years and his leadership has and continues to be pivotal in establishing and implementing AIS management protocols that will protect our natural resources for generations to come.

Western AIS Leader Award

Nominated by : Robert Walters and Josh Leonard

Leah Elwell – Conservation Collaborations

I am honored to submit this nomination for Leah Elwell for the Western AIS Leader award. Leah consistently demonstrates exceptional leadership, going far and beyond her formal responsibilities to advance Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) prevention, regional coordination, and emergency preparedness across the West.



As coordinator of the Western Regional Panel (WRP), Leah serves as the strategic and operational backbone of our community. Beyond seamlessly orchestrating the WRP Annual Meeting and facilitating the Executive Committee operations, she serves as a vital bridge to national policy by representing the WRP on the National Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force – ensuring western priorities directly influence national strategies.

Leah's commitment to regional readiness is unmatched. She stands out as arguably the most prolific facilitator of invasive species rapid response exercises in the western United States. By designing and leading both targeted and multi-jurisdictional tabletop exercises, she has helped transform

regional preparedness from a theoretical goal into an operational reality, elevating our collective readiness to respond to new detections.

Additionally, Leah served as an editor of the “Uniform Minimum Protocols and Standards for Watercraft Inspection and Decontamination Programs for Dreissenid Mussels in the Western United States”. This keystone document is foundational to our work, as it compiles vital scientific information to standardize and inform inspection and decontamination procedures across the entire West.

There are many additional examples of Leah’s contributions to AIS management across the West, but to sum it up, Leah’s vision, technical rigor, and tireless coordination have helped to build the very infrastructure our region relies on to tackle AIS threats. She exemplifies what it means to be a regional leader, and I urge the committee to recognize her contributions with this award.