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TOP STORY

Volunteer heroes: Couple advocates for outdoors, recreation and more

BY TONY BUHR staff writer

Aug 11, 2016

If there's an issue involving the outdoors in Kittitas County, Bill and Deborah Essman are probably involved.

The Essmans, retired employees with the Washington state Department of Fish and Wildlife, both have served as president of the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club. They've volunteered countless hours cleaning up public land, attending public meetings and advocating for recreation and access to the outdoors.

"It's not altruistic," Deborah Essman said, "We love being out in the mountains and if you love being outdoors you should work to preserve it."

The two were honored for their work earlier this summer when they received the Commissioner of Public Lands Volunteer Hero award from the Department of Natural Resources.

Larry Leach, DNR state lands assistant region manager, said the award recognizes people who have a long history of service to public lands.

"We wouldn't be able to provide the opportunities we do if it wasn't for their efforts," Leach said.

The Volunteer Hero award was started in 2012 and is given to a handful of people every year.

The Essmans received the award during a BBQ Flats dedication ceremony in May. Darrell Wallace, a member of Back Country Horsemen of Washington, also was given the award.

The Essmans received the award for their efforts supporting DNR in increasing its law enforcement staff, Leach said. As a direct result, DNR was able to add an extra officer to its southeast region, which includes Kittitas County.

Leach said the Essmans also participate in recreation efforts to update future plans for the Naneum Ridge and the Teanaway forests. Additionally the Kittitas County Field and Stream club participates with the DNR green dot sign program, helping keep track and update signage.

"When the burn ban comes up, Bill is sitting in the parking lot waiting to help put up signs," Leach said.

They are also part of the Forest Watch Program, he said, and patrol campgrounds to report acts of littering, vandalism and non-permitted camp fires.

"I wish all our volunteers were as passionate as Bill and Deb," he said. "They have a long history of public service."

Takes a team

Both Essmans are involved in several clubs and organizations in the county and state.

"It's nice to be recognized," Deborah said. "But it takes everybody to make this work."

Deborah is part of the Washington Big Tent Outdoor Recreation, Teanaway Community Forest Advisory Committee, a board member of the Kittitas County Chamber of Commerce and more.

Bill is on the Kittitas County Commissioners Public Lands Advisory Committee, Wild Horse Wind Power Technical Advisory Committee, the Wildlife Area Advisory Committee and Fish and Wildlife's LT Murray committee.

Bill Essman said people have to get involved to help keep lands open.

"There's a faction of people who don't give a darn," he said.

It would be easier for public land agencies to close lands down than try to manage them, Bill Essman said.

That's why he volunteers to stop people from littering and vandalism, to keep lands open.

For Deborah, it's about leaving a future for their grandchildren.

"We want to make sure that heritage continues," she said.

Tony Buhr