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Oklahoma Innovators: Citizen Scientists Celebrate 20 Years of Volunteer Water Quality Monitoring & Education

EDMOND, OKLA., (September 23, 2014) – Volunteers from central and western Oklahoma converged on Blue Thumb Conference at Arcadia Lake on Sept. 19 and 20 to celebrate 20 years of water quality monitoring and education through Oklahoma Conservation Commission’s (OCC) Blue Thumb Program.

Conference attendees got to meet with field leaders in water and soil science, learned about the latest technologies in urban and rural natural resource management and enjoyed kayaking and nature walks. Awards were also presented to exceptional volunteers including some of the first Blue Thumb volunteers and a group of middle school students who published a children’s book on water quality.

“These volunteers are collecting real, credible water quality data. The work of everyday citizens has the potential to change the landscape of water resource management,” said Mike Bira, US EPA Oklahoma Nonpoint Source Program manager, who gave a presentation at the conference.

Founded in 1992, Blue Thumb provides free training and equipment to over 200 volunteers who monitor the health of over 100 Oklahoma streams. The program also provides teaching tools for educational outreach at community events and schools.

Oklahoma isn’t the only state with a volunteer program like Blue Thumb, but professional oversight sets us apart. “Professional water quality monitors review every piece of data collected by our volunteers to insure accuracy and quality,” said Jeri Fleming, OCC environmental programs manager. “Our volunteer data collection goes beyond being a valuable educational exercise—it’s a decision making tool for policy makers.”

Blue Thumb volunteers come from all walks of life and often have little to no professional scientific background. By supplying tools such as the rapid bio-assessment training and chemical monitoring test kits, Blue Thumb is able to turn any concerned citizen into a scientist during one of its weekend trainings held throughout the year.

“Anyone can volunteer, anyone can make a difference. Our volunteers are teachers and students, military personnel and farmers—you name it. They have different backgrounds, but they’re scientists at heart, and they care, they really care about Oklahoma and our environment,” said Cheryl Cheadle, OCC Blue Thumb coordinator and founder. “All we do is give them the tools and support to express that care in a way that maximizes the impact of their work.”

In addition to data collection, Blue Thumb volunteers work in their communities to provide education on ways the public can help improve Oklahoma streams and rivers.

Blue Thumb’s next training event is scheduled for Oct. 10 and 11 in Tulsa. Learn more at www.bluthumbok.com.

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