

Comp to be First Federal Employee Named River Hero



Dr. T Allan Comp attends a tree planting event in Boone County, W. Va.

Photo by Jessica Vierling

The world needs heroes and America's rivers have a new one.

Dr. T Allan Comp, Founder and Coordinator of the Appalachian Coal Country Watershed Team (ACCWT) and the Western Hardrock Watershed Team (WHWT), will be honored as a National River Hero on May 31, at River Network's National River Rally in Baltimore.

The peer-nominated award program, now in its eighth year, honors individuals who have made substantial and inspirational contributions to river conservation. That someone is getting the award isn't unusual – that Dr. Comp is getting it is: He is the first federal employee to receive the award since its inception in 2002.

“Dr. T Allan Comp successfully uses a multidisciplinary approach to bring hope to rural communities affected economically and environmentally from coal extraction in Appalachia”, said Katherine Luscher, Program Director at River Network. “Allan truly epitomizes the spirit and intent of the award, and we are thrilled to honor him for all he has done to artfully transform an environmental liability into community assets.”

An employee of the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, Comp works through the ACCWT and the WHWT to support the efforts of small community/watershed groups in mining communities of Appalachia and the Rocky Mountains.

The ACCWT and the WHWT are coalitions of grassroots-level groups created to repair the environmental degradation left by historic coal mining while creating economic stability needed in rural communities.

The ACCWT, headquartered in Beckley, W.Va., serves an eight-state area comprising Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Alabama. Its goals include building local capacity to fix problems, monitoring water quality, enhancing community outreach and education, developing local communities, and developing the professional skills of the VISTA Volunteers who serve with the organization. Dewey Houck, a West Virginian who began a local watershed association as a result of Comp's efforts added, "One thing people don't really focus on is the young people that go through his program. These young people are gaining a better understanding of not just what it takes to improve the environment, but to be a community leader."

The WHWT was founded at the request of the Colorado Division of Reclamation, Mining and Safety, to emulate the successes of the ACCWT.

Both Teams are supported by an innovative partnership between AmeriCorps VISTA and the Office of Surface Mining. The ACCWT began in 2002 as an OSM/VISTA initiative, placing determined college-trained OSM/VISTA Volunteers in a year of service in rural mining communities. It currently has 36 OSM/VISTAs in the field with another 24 positions funded under the Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and 20 Summer Associates starting this spring/summer.

The WHWT successfully extends this method throughout Colorado's local mining community/watershed groups. Currently, 17 OSM/VISTAs are serving throughout Colorado and an additional 12 will be starting this spring. Both New Mexico and Montana are also getting WHWT teams.

Comp is one of five persons this year to receive the National River Hero award for commitment to clean, healthy waters. The National River Hero, a peer-nominated award started in 2002, annually celebrates rivers and recognizes individuals in the watershed movement who provide leadership, inspire the work of others, utilize innovative strategies and techniques to achieve significant results, and foster the growth and sustainability of a watershed community. To date, 28 individuals have been honored as National River Heroes.



The Western Hardrock Watershed Team, an OSM/VISTA Initiative. Spring 2009.