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NATIONAL
OCEANIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC
ADMINISTRATION

CONTACT: Brian Peters
(205) 664-3010 ext. 223
Ron Trumbla
(817) 978-1111 ext. 140

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**NOAA HONORS EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM MEMBERS
AS ENVIRONMENTAL HEROES**

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), an agency of the Department of Commerce, selected the Alabama Emergency Response Team (ALERT) as the recipient of one of this year's NOAA Environmental Hero Awards. The award recognizes ALERT for its outstanding efforts in support of the NOAA National Weather Service (NWS) Forecast Office in Birmingham.

Held in conjunction with Earth Day celebrations, the award honors NOAA volunteers for their "tireless efforts to preserve and protect our nation's environment."

"NOAA and the nation are fortunate to have such dedicated people volunteer so much of their time," said retired Navy Vice Adm. Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Ph.D., undersecretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator. "They set a perfect example for others to follow in their communities. America needs more environmental heroes like them."

Under the leadership of ALERT President Chuck Arthur, team members have spent hundreds of hours coordinating storm reports in support of severe weather operations throughout the Birmingham office's warning area. Over the years, they have proven invaluable during such major events as the historic tornado outbreak of November 24, 2001; the F4 tornado that struck Tuscaloosa County on December 16, 2000; and, the April 8, 1998, F5 tornado that ripped through Jefferson County.

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The staff in Birmingham was especially grateful for ALERT volunteer's help during last year's Veterans Day outbreak which included two long track F3 tornadoes that killed 12 people. The volunteers manned amateur radio equipment throughout the event, relaying critical storm reports to the warning meteorologists. And as soon as warnings were issued, the team relayed them to numerous emergency managers across Central and Northern Alabama keeping them apprised of latest weather information.

The steady flow of reports were crucial to the issuance of new warnings and the office's ability to quickly get the word out to the public to take protective actions. The dedication and hard work of the ALERT volunteers during the November 10, 2002, tornado outbreak clearly saved lives.

"On behalf of the 12,500 men and women working for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, I am pleased to present you with this 2003 Environmental Hero Award," Lautenbacher wrote in a letter to the recipients. "Your dedicated efforts and outstanding accomplishments greatly benefit the environment and make our nation a better place for all Americans."

There are a total of 36 winners (35 individuals and one organization). Five awards are being presented posthumously. Previous award recipients include oceanographers Jean-Michel Cousteau and Sylvia Earle and actor Ted Danson.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of the nation's coastal and marine resources. NOAA is part of the U.S. Department of Commerce. To learn more about NOAA, please visit <http://www.noaa.gov>.