

DEM Honored at Annual EPA Earth Day Awards Program

The RI Great Outdoors Pursuit and John Leo of DEM's Office of Emergency Response were among those presented with 2010 Environmental Merit Awards from the US Environmental Protection Agency during a celebration of the 40th anniversary of Earth Day in Boston. Given out by EPA since 1970, the merit awards honor individuals and groups who have shown particular ingenuity and commitment in their efforts.



The Governmental Merit Award was presented to DEM's Division of Parks and Recreation for the Great Outdoors Pursuit. DEM launched the RI Great Outdoors Pursuit to reconnect families with the outdoors, encourage more physical activity, build the next generation of environmental stewards and showcase state parks and forests. Over a 12-week period in 2009, teams were challenged to visit seven different state forests and parks, where they participated in outdoor adventures including hiking, biking, fishing, rock climbing, volleyball, kayaking, horseback riding, geo caching, tree identification, maple sugaring demonstrations and old-fashion lawn games. The events also featured naturalist programs and environmental and health educational exhibits. Last year, more than 1,600 people on 378 teams reunited with the great outdoors and became more active and fit. By re-engaging Rhode Islanders with the natural world of the state parks, DEM has seen a steady increase in the number of patrons visiting state park and recreation facilities.

The Lifetime Achievement Merit Award was presented to John Leo. John Leo was working to get a master's degree in marine studies when he was called to serve in the military, going to Vietnam, Europe and the US. While in Virginia, he was involved in firefighting and hazardous materials spill response. This work led to a job as a toxicologist in the RI Department of Health in 1973. There, he analyzed toxic substances and published several articles on drug extraction and toxic materials. In 1979 he moved to the RI Department of Environmental Management as a sanitary engineer, using his chemistry background to address chemical cleanups. He was charged with defining hazards, coming up with cleanup methods, creating work plans, instructing personnel and setting up safety procedures. In 1980, Leo realized DEM had a duty to first responders and he developed a program providing emergency services for hazardous material incidents. He bought protective equipment and reference guides, as a start. Thus began the DEM Emergency Responder – a 24-7 position. Since taking that position, Leo has given back hundreds of sick and vacation hours every year. In 1981 he started teaching hazardous material classes to first responders and he has conducted HazMat training within DEM, the state and neighboring states. He has trained fire and police departments, private industry, farm workers and others.