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Gulf of Mexico Program

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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BALDWIN COUNTY SCHOOLS PROJECT SEAS WINS 1ST PLACE GULF GUARDIAN AWARD

STENNIS SPACE CENTER, Miss. – The Gulf of Mexico Program recently announced that, Baldwin County Schools will receive a first place Gulf Guardian Award for 2003 in the Youth and Education Category for Project SEAS: Students Exploring Aquaculture Science. The award will be presented to representatives of the school system at the Southern States Environmental Conference and Exhibition scheduled Sept. 23-25, in Biloxi.

Four years ago the Gulf of Mexico Program developed the Gulf Guardian awards as a method of recognizing and honoring the businesses, community groups, individuals, and agencies that are taking positive steps to keep the Gulf healthy, beautiful and productive. The Gulf of Mexico Program began in 1988 to protect, restore, and maintain the health and productivity of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem in economically sustainable ways. Award entries were received from Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. A first, second, and third place award are given each year in six categories – individual, business, youth and education, nonprofit organizations, government, and partnership efforts.

“Our oceans and coasts are precious resources,” said Jimmy Palmer, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Regional Administrator in Atlanta. “Coastal and marine waters provide some of the most diverse and biologically productive habitats on the planet,” he added. “This year’s Gulf Guardian Award winners are doing their part to keep these valuable resources healthy and productive.”

Project SEAS: Students Exploring Aquaculture Science, an on-going project for the Baldwin County School System, began in August 2000 when the Advisory Board first met to begin plans for establishing an aquascience facility on the campus of Fairhope High School. With leadership from Pam Henson, the committee developed a timeline for visiting other facilities in the state as well as seeking and submitting grant proposals. The Advisory Committee consisted of school system employees, elected officials, representatives from the seafood industry, and local contractors. The committee made a formal presentation to the Board of Education seeking permission to build an aquascience center. The committee felt a such a center was needed to provide students with a program that placed emphasis on preserving and protecting Mobile Bay and to provide students with an aquascience lab requiring real-life problem solving skills. The center also gives students opportunities to raise marine organisms in an aquaculture setting, introduce students to a career in the field of aquascience, and provides students with opportunities to collect and analyze data on organisms found in local habitats. The Board of Education overwhelmingly approved this program and gave the committee permission to seek funding. The facility was completed in March of 2003, and students are actively engaged in raising fish from hatchlings to harvestable size. Students are

also raising vegetables through aquaponics, and in the fall of 2003, students will be raising seagrass beds for replenishment.

Gulf of Mexico Program Office Acting Director Bryon O. Griffith said, "Our 2003 Gulf Guardian Award winners are to be commended for taking action to preserve and restore the Gulf of Mexico." "One out of every six jobs in the United States is marine-related, generating \$54 billion in goods and services annually. Protecting these waters makes sense economically, aesthetically, and environmentally. Acting as one community to protect our one and only Gulf of Mexico is essential to our way of life and our standard of living."

For a list of all the Gulf Guardian Award winners for 2003, visit the Gulf of Mexico Program web site at <http://www.epa.gov/gmpo> and click on the Gulf Guardian Award button on the left.

The Gulf of Mexico Program is underwritten by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and is a non-regulatory, inclusive consortium of state and federal government agencies and representatives of the business and agricultural community, fishing industry, scientists, environmentalists, and community leaders from all five Gulf States. The Gulf Program seeks to improve the environmental health of the Gulf in concert with economic development.

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Editor's Note: For more information about the Gulf Guardian Awards and the Gulf of Mexico Program, call Terry Hines Smith at 228-688-1159. For more information about Project SEAS, call Pam Henson at 251-972-6863.