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Chico Fourth-Grade Class is Grand-Prize Winner for 2019 Cal Water H₂O Challenge

From Ashes of Camp Fire, Resilient Sierra View Elementary Students Planted Seeds of Hope

CHICO, Calif., March 28, 2019 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- Emily Akimoto's fourth-grade students from Sierra View Elementary School (Chico, Calif.) learned today that their project to restore their ecosystem and community after the Camp Fire won the 2019 California Water Service (Cal Water) H₂O Challenge. The grand prize includes a \$3,500 grant for the classroom and a tent-camping trip for all class students to Yosemite National Park in partnership with NatureBridge, an environmental science education program.

The Cal Water H₂O Challenge (challenge.calwater.com) is a collaboration between Cal Water and the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) that asks students to solve a local or global water issue. The annual competition is open to fourth-through sixth-grade students and teachers in schools served by Cal Water.

Akimoto's students felt a call-to-action after the Camp Fire, California's most destructive fire in recorded history, devastated parts of the Chico community and entire neighboring towns including Paradise, Calif. The students changed their initial competition project to "Protecting Paradise" to reflect their desire to help the community. This project included researching and testing local watersheds, installing wattles and plants to preserve Butte Creek, and creating pamphlets to inform the Paradise community how to effectively rebuild. The impact: cleaner water, fresh greenery, an informed community, and an outlet for student growth and recovery.

This is Akimoto's second time winning the Cal Water H₂O Challenge (her class was the grand-prize winner in 2017), but this year's project was even more impactful. "Never has a project brought so many tears, taught so much resilience, or promoted so much healing. It is what we all needed," Akimoto said.

"The winners of this year's Cal Water H₂O Challenge are remarkable," said Martin A. Kropelnicki, Cal Water President and CEO. "The Camp Fire impacted our customers, employees, and neighboring communities in a way that we haven't seen in the 90 years we've been providing water service. Seeing these students' dedication to their community gives me great hope for future generations."

"What is even more remarkable is that Ms. Akimoto is a repeat winner with one of her classes in this statewide competition," Kropelnicki added. "We applaud her ongoing commitment to tackling and helping solve important water issues."

According to Christiane Maertens, NAAEE H₂O Challenge Program Director, classrooms like this support NAAEE's National Project for Excellence in Environmental Education goals.

“Ms. Akimoto and her fourth-graders are a powerful example of how teachers and students can feel empowered after a major tragedy and create real-world solutions by understanding their community and environment, and take action,” said Maertens.

By integrating water-efficiency, educational programs, and school curriculum, NAAEE and Cal Water's partnership positively impacts California's environment. The partnership has brought STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) and NGSS (Next-Generation Science Standards) into the classroom to equip students with the skills they need to succeed. This format helps students intellectually and emotionally, because, as Akimoto said, “My students needed control, and knowledge could give that to them.”

Other Cal Water H₂O Challenge winners are:

2nd place: Rachel Lenix's sixth-grade class from Downtown Elementary in Bakersfield, Calif., developed strategies to collect rain water for an edible garden in their school. The produce collected from the garden will be served in the school's cafeteria. This class won a \$2,500 classroom grant along with a pizza party and Cal Water prize pack for each student in the class.

3rd place: Mike Buckley's fifth-grade class from Murdock Elementary in Chico, Calif., monitored their school's water usage to learn how to reduce their reliance on groundwater. The students then created a garden that relies solely on rainwater. These winners received a \$2,000 classroom grant plus a Cal Water prize pack for each class student.

4th place: Keri Wohlford's fifth-/sixth-grade class from Robert Hill Lane Elementary in Monterey Park, Calif., revived their school garden by planting a water conservation garden and educating their peers and community on water conservation. The class received a \$1,000 grant and Cal Water prize pack for each student in the class.

5th place: Kristen Thomas' fourth-/fifth-grade class from Little Chico Creek Elementary in Chico, Calif., tested the water quality of Little Chico Creek and educated the community on how to take care of the creek. The class received a \$500 grant and Cal Water prize pack for each student in the class.

About Cal Water

California Water Service serves about 2 million people through 484,900 service connections in California. The utility has provided water service in the state since 1926. Additional information may be obtained online at www.calwater.com.

About NAAEE

For four decades, the North American Association for Environmental Education has been dedicated to accelerating environmental literacy and civic engagement through the power of education. NAAEE supports a network of 20,000 educators and 56 regional affiliate organizations working in environmental education in more than 30 countries. For more information, visit www.naaee.org.