

YOUTH EDUCATION EVENTS INSPIRE IDAHO KIDS TO LEARN, CRAFT CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO NATURAL RESOURCE ISSUES



Students hard at work building a model of their plan for sage grouse management during the Range Skillathon at the Schwenkfelder Ranch.

By Steve Stuebner

At the first-ever Rangeland Skillathon in Cambridge, FFA teams were presented with this scenario: Greater sage grouse, a candidate for listing as an endangered species, are occupying a 200-acre pasture on a ranch. The pasture is bordered by roads and power lines. How would you enhance wildlife habitat for the sage grouse in the pasture?

Five FFA teams created a sage grouse management plan for this scenario and built a small-scale model that embodied their plan in a cardboard box.

Virginia Harness, 17, who was on the first-place team of high school juniors and seniors from the Canyon County Trailblazers FFA club, said her team received the sage grouse scenario 30 days before the Skillathon, giving them time to write a management plan. They studied the Sage Grouse Initiative web site and others to learn about sage grouse and came up with a plan.

"We knew that the biggest threat to sage grouse is fire, so we planned firebreaks around the pasture," Harness said. "The sage grouse were raising their young in

the pasture, and we assumed that we had more pastures on the ranch, so we rotated the cattle out of that pasture while the sage grouse were using it. We also tagged the top wire of the fences around the pasture to make it visible to sage grouse."

"To keep the cattle away, we placed mineral blocks in the alternative pasture to keep them there," she continued. "We placed those mineral blocks near juniper trees and power lines, because the sage grouse wouldn't want to use those areas because of predators perching there. We also saw education being an important component, so we notified the neighbors that the sage grouse were using the pasture, and posted signs around the field."

Harness' team crafted a winning management plan that mirrors the best practices used by ranchers across the West. But they had to explain their plan in a verbal presentation, with all the team members participating.

"They were all very articulate," said Neil Rimbey, a University of Idaho economist at the Caldwell Research and Extension Center who helped judge the event. "All

of the presentations were well-done and well-researched. It was difficult to pick the winners."

May is a busy month for youth education events in Idaho. The 2015 Envirothon in Challis, sponsored by the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts, attracted 18 teams, with a team from Homedale High School capturing first place under the guidance of seasoned advisor Sue Poland.

Four-hundred students participated in the Idaho State Forestry contest held in Careywood, located midway between Coeur d'Alene and Sandpoint. The Careywood Eager Beavers 4-H team swept the first-place senior team honors and first-place senior individual award, with Joseph Spencer winning a \$100 cash prize for placing first in the senior individual division, and his brother, Daniel winning the senior second prize and \$50 cash. The forestry contest is co-sponsored by the Idaho Department of Lands, Bonner Soil and Water Conservation District and the U.S. Forest Service.

Also in N. Idaho, the Lewis Soil Conservation District sponsored the Winchester Environmental Days, attended by about

Cont. on Page 2

YOUTH ED *Cont. from Pg. 1*



Identifying soil layers at the North Idaho Forestry Contest.

95 students. Multiple agency officials educated the kids via a nature trail by the National Park Service, canoeing by the Lewis Soil Conservation District, air quality by the NezPerce Tribe, fishing by Idaho Fish and Game, the life cycle of salmon by NRCS, fire control and forestry by IDL, and soils and geology by the Conservation commission.

At Orofino Earthday Education Days, about 160 kids participated in the two-day event by touring the Dworshak Fish Hatchery, learning about soils with the Conservation Commission, forestry with IDL, air quality, weeds and biocontrol with the NezPerce Tribe, forest fires with the Forest Service, and wildlife with the National Park Service.

About 400 5th graders participate in the Pend Oreille Water Festival in late May. The kids go on an outdoor field trip and learn about water -- our most precious resource-- and the Clark Fork-Pend Oreille Watershed. Students learn about the dynamic world of water as they rotate through five instructional stations -- fisheries, watersheds, water quality, animal tracks and Northwest explorers.

The West Cassia and East Cassia Soil and Water Conservation Districts host the Idaho State FFA and 4-H Land & Soil Evaluation Event in the fall, with 17 FFA teams and two 4-H teams participating. Rigby FFA took first place, followed by Jerome FFA and Preston FFA. Regional contests leading up to the state competition involved 450 kids and 50 advisors.

“It’s really impressive to see such a great turnout at these youth education events. These kids represent the next generation of conservation in Idaho,” said Teri Murison, administrator of the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission, one of the many co-sponsors of the Envirothon. “Clearly, the students really enjoy learning about our state’s natural resources with true hands-on activities. It also shows how local conservation districts are putting a lot of effort into education and outreach, with the assistance of many co-sponsors and state and federal agency professionals.”

Exposing kids to natural resource issues in high school can potentially pique their interest in potential career paths, notes Kathy Weaver, a supervisor on the East Side Soil and Water Conservation District in Idaho Falls, who helped with the Idaho Envirothon event.

“Anytime we have an opportunity to give students an opportunity to interact with natural resources pros is a real plus,” Weaver says. “They get some hands-on experience, and they get to experience what the real world is all about. For some, it can be a game-changer. There’s that interaction



Congratulations to this year’s winner of the Envirothon: Homedale High School. Back row, L-R, Alec Egurolla, Jason Buenrostro, Sue Poland (teacher). Front row, L-R, Delaney Pharis, Jennifer Bautista, and Justine Cornwell.

CAN YOU HELP?

The Canyon County Trailblazers FFA club is trying to raise \$6,000 to cover travel expenses to attend the National Wildlife Habitat Education Program in Alabama, August 2-5, 2015.

Donations can be made at:
www.gofundme.com/IdahoWHEP

Cont. on Pg. 3

YOUTH ED *Cont. from Pg. 2*

with people you don't learn in a textbook." Virginia Harness agreed. "One of my team members wants to be an advisor for FFA in rangelands education and another would like to be a wildlife biologist," she said. "I know I want to work in rural areas with rural people. I still want to learn more about rangelands -- people don't realize how livestock and wildlife can co-exist."

"Our goal is to pique the students' interest in forestry and natural resource management," adds Karen Robinson, coordinator of the forestry contest for the Idaho Department of Lands. "Who knows? It could become a lifelong passion for them."

In the Envirothon, high school students had to design an urban park on top of an old landfill, complete with recreation fields, trees, playground equipment, etc. The old landfill had been "declared clean" by the EPA, but the students had to be ready to explain to a local city council and soccer moms that the park would be safe for children to use.

Sue Poland's students from Homedale High came to the event ready to discuss the issues anticipated. Each student on the team represented different sides of the issue, including the viewpoint of a concerned parent, Poland said. "They had to answer the question, how is this going to be safe for my kids?"

At the Envirothon, students went through



Students learning basic forestry and resource management skills. Pictured above is the tree health station.

five stations: wildlife, soil and land use, forestry, aquatic ecology and urban forestry. The teams were tested on all five of those areas and graded accordingly. The Homedale kids' scores on those five subject areas is what carried them to the top prize, Poland said.

By winning the event, the kids earned a berth to the 2015 National Conservation Foundation Envirothon competition in Springfield, Mo., July 27-Aug. 2. Their travel expenses and registration fees will be paid by the Idaho Envirothon.

"The Envirothon is a very powerful step forward in the lives of these students, one that they will never forget, and neither will I," said Norman Wright, chairman of the Conservation Commission. "I remain in awe of not only the talent of the students participating, but also the dedication and hard work of the many volunteers that it takes to pull off an event of this magnitude. The whole event is a home run for the kids, advisors, volunteers and co-sponsors involved. It makes me really proud to be part of Conservation the Idaho Way."



Bill Love, founder of the state forestry contest and MC for this year's contest looks on from behind while winners the Careywood Eager Beavers 4-H team show off the coveted crosscut saw award. L-R, are Joseph Spencer, Daniel Spencer, Magnolia Fry, Doug Bradetich, 2015 Honorary Chair, and Ethan Spencer.

By coming out on top of the Rangeland Skillathon, the Can-

yon County Trailblazers FFA club is now in fund-raising mode to compete in the National Wildlife Habitat Education Program competition in Alabama, Aug. 2-5. The Skillathon was sponsored by the Adams County Soil & Water Conservation District, Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission, UI-Extension in Adams County and the Conservation Commission.

In the Idaho State Forestry Contest, participating teams had to research and prepare for being tested in a diversity of natural resource topics, such as plant and tree identification, soils, water quality issues, forestry tools of the trade and much more. Students attend the contest from all corners of Idaho, including Priest River, Bonners Ferry, Meridian, Boise, and Potlatch.

There were four stations that all of the students visited as part of the contest:

- Timber cruising
- Timber scaling
- Compass and pacing
- Tree identification

Students in the junior and senior divisions

YOUTH ED Cont.. from Pg. 3

are tested in six additional areas: silviculture, soils and water quality, map reading, noxious weeds, forest insects and disease, and forestry tool identification.

Janet Benoit, advisor for the Careywood Eager Beaver 4-H Club, begins to prepare her kids for the state forestry contest in the fall. "My kids love this stuff," she said. "They really want to win!"

"We work on all the things they need to know. We go for walks in the woods and identify plants and trees. We practice using the forestry instruments. They study, and read and work at it until they get it down."

Some of the more challenging topics are

identifying different kinds of soil, and map-reading, she said.

"In the contest, they have to identify the soil layers and soil horizons," Benoit explains. "They also have to put their hand in a bucket of dirt, squish it around in their hands, and indicate if it's sandy, loamy, clay, what kind of soil it is ... that can be hard."

The winner, Joseph Spencer, is a junior who is home-schooled by his parents Vern and Amy Spencer. He's won 1st place before in the senior division, and taken 2nd place twice. The whole family is "really into forestry and environmental education," Benoit said. The Spencers raise organic produce on their farm for a business called "Vern's Veggies." Joseph's brother Daniel came in 2nd place in the senior division this year, their younger brother Ethan competed in the rookie division, and their younger sister Hannah is anxious to compete when she's old enough to do so.

"Vern helps coach all of the kids," she said. "It's all good, they really enjoy it, and they have a lot of fun."

The Careywood Eager Beavers won a traveling chrome-plated cross-cut saw for taking first place. The team is hoping to compete in the National 4-H Forestry Invitational competition in Weston, West Virginia in late July.

"I'm hoping to compete at nationals this



Learning about soil and geology at this year's Winchester Environmental Days.

year," Joseph Spencer said. "We're still talking to our team-mates to see if we can travel to nationals as a team."

Joseph's favorite part of the forestry contest is tree and plant identification, and the most challenging parts were compass and pacing, map-reading and silviculture. Daniel Spencer said his favorite part of the contest "was the awards ceremony. I also enjoyed plant and tree identification because the other kids didn't know as much about that."

Joseph, who is a junior in high school, is interested in natural resources but he's doesn't necessarily want to be a forester as a profession. "I'm still not certain about what I want to do," he said. □

LOW INTEREST LOANS IDAHO CONSERVATION COMMISSION

- Sprinkler Irrigation
- No-Till Drills
- Livestock Feeding Operations
- Fences
- Solar Stock Water Pump Systems

**2.5% - 3.5% INTEREST
TERMS 7 TO 15 YEARS
LOANS UP TO \$200,000**



www.swc.idaho.gov • 208-332-1790

COMMISSION

- H. Norman Wright, Chairman
- Roger Stutzman, Vice Chairman
- Jerry Trebesch, Secretary
- Dave Radford, Commissioner
- Leon Slichter, Commissioner
- Teri Murrison, Administrator



SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION

650 West State Street, Room 145 • Boise Idaho 83702 • P: 208-332-1790
F: 208-332-1799 • info@swc.idaho.gov • www.swc.idaho.gov

Conservation the Idaho Way: Sowing Seeds of Stewardship