



Three members of the winning team from Whistle Stop 4H Club L-R: Jonathan McComas, Jared Cramer and Samantha Guadagnini. Not pictured, Alanna Hinkle (Courtesy ISFC).

PARTICIPATION INCREASES AT IDAHO STATE FORESTRY CONTEST AND ENVIROTHON, BENEFITTING STUDENTS

By Steve Stuebner

More than 300 students participated in the 40th annual Idaho State Forestry Contest, held at Farragut State Park, and about 75 students participated in the Envirothon, held at the Living Waters Ranch in Challis. Both events were held in May 2023.

Attendance was up after several years of interruptions due to the Covid pandemic, organizers said.

"We were rejuvenated for sure for our 40th annual event," said Ken Homik, state coordinator of the Idaho State Forestry Contest for the Idaho Department of Lands. "Last year, we had a pretty good showing, and this year we had a great turnout from students and volunteers. Everyone

was really excited about the event."

Ten high school teams across Southern Idaho participated in the Envirothon, plus North Idaho STEM Charter School. New teams from Malad, American Falls and Idaho City came to the Envirothon this year, officials said.

Twenty-two different school groups including public, private and charter schools, FFAs and 4H clubs participated in the State Forestry Contest. Students vie for cash prizes of up to \$500 and college scholarship money up to \$1,000 for the first place individual. At the Envirothon, winning teams normally advance to the national Envirothon competition. But in both events, it's often a matter of pride to score well because both

events are rigorous academically.

Science advisors for the teams spend considerable time before the events to go over the natural resources topics with students to teach them many of the core subjects that students need to know. At the Envirothon, students get a 45-minute briefing at four stations on aquatics, forestry, wildlife to get an overview from experts, and then they've got 15 minutes to complete a quiz on the details.

"The students aren't going to learn everything they need to know in the soil pit in 45 minutes," notes George Hitz, a water quality specialist for the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission. "Studying up on soils before-hand is crucial."

At the State Forestry contest, students need to know the intricate details about 10 topics – log scaling, timber cruising, tree and plant identification, map reading, compass reading and pacing, forestry tool identification, soils and water quality, tree health, silviculture and noxious weeds. Students have 20 minutes at each station to complete a quiz before moving on to the next station.

The State Forestry contest is open to not only high school teams, but also junior high and grade school teams, from 5th grade and up.

“The students take it really seriously,” Homik says. “There’s scholarships and cash prizes at stake. There’s a fair amount of motivation to really step up and be ready for it.”

In the State Forestry Contest senior division, the Whistle Stop 4H Club notched first place, followed by Lake Pend Oreille High School in second place, and Moscow 4H Club came in third. In the senior individual awards, students from the Whistle Stop 4-H Club made a clean sweep, with Jonathan McComas placing first, Alanna Hinkle second and Samantha Guadagnini third. Sean



The winning team at the Envirothon competition this year in Challis.

Hammond, a former logger and forester for Inland Empire Paper, is one of the advisors for the Whistle Stop 4H Club, along with Clayton and Deanna Young. The students practiced learning about log scaling, silvaculture, plant and tree identification, soils and other forestry-related topics on Hammond’s 80-acre property where he does active forest management, and on Inland Empire Paper forest property.

All of the learning occurs after school hours.

“We start in January, and go through the handbook in detail,” Hammond says. “We have little mini practice quizzes that we go through, and we do practice contests in the field. Our students worked really hard. They’ll all sharp kids. Obviously, their practice paid off.”

Hammond, incidentally, was a participant in the State Forestry Contest when he was a high school student at Post Falls. He knows the drill.



Students calculate the size of a log as part of the State Forestry Contest. (photo courtesy IDL)

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The Whistle Stop Junior 4H team also captured first place; two individuals on the junior team captured second and third place.

Jonathan McComas not only captured first place in the senior division for Whistle Stop 4H Club, but he also received \$2,000 in scholarships and cash prizes.

In the Envirothon, North Idaho STEM from Rathdrum captured first place, followed by Gooding Team #1 and Gooding Team #2.

North Idaho STEM has been in the top-running for several years; “they’ve got a good science advisor,” Hitz said. Efforts to reach their advisor were unsuccessful.

At the Envirothon, students not only have to bone up on aquatics, forestry, wildlife and soils, they have to be ready to tackle a current issue problem and give an oral presentation on how to solve it with less than 24

hours of prep time.

Current issue - the Problem to Solve

This was the scenario for Envirothon participants: A farmer owns and operates a 1,900-acre dryland farm in Idaho that currently operates as a traditional hard red winter wheat-summer fallow cropping strategy. On average, approximately 800 acres are planted in winter wheat, 195 acres in spring grain, 5 acres of forage, 800

acres left in summer fallow, 10 acres of pasture, and 90 acres that are native trees/forbs not farmed due to excessive slope. The farmer has an average of 5 head of cattle that he pastures Spring-Fall and feeds baled forage in the winter months.

The farmer is fairly innovative and has tried other farming methods and crops in the past 3 years, such as:

- Tried No-till direct seeding spring grains last year. Rented 15’ no-till drill from their local Soil and Water Conservation District for \$50 per day and \$12 per acre.
- Last two years conventionally planted 5 acres of fall cover-crops for livestock grazing in Oct.-Dec.
- Wind breaks near the homestead.
- Habitat wildlife plantings on 30 acres of unfarmed land.

Students were tasked with creating a cropping system plan or changes to their operation that could address anticipated issues with climate change on the farm. Create goals and objectives (short-term and long-term). Highlight suggested changes to farming practices or methods,



Pocatello Team #2 members give their oral presentation on how they would tweak management on a dry farm to maintain profitability in the face of a changing climate. (courtesy Envirothon)



Students learn about soils at the Envirothon. (photo courtesy Envirothon)



Students learn about tree identification and silviculture at the State Forestry Contest (courtesy IDL).

address pros and cons, and state reasoning behind decisions (addressing financial stability, environmental considerations, and farm viability). How would the farmer make their farm more resilient to changing conditions like climate?

Is the current winter wheat-summer fallow farming system viable if production trends are declining and costs increasing? How can the farmer keep the multi-generational farm in production agriculture, environmentally sustainable, and financially viable to justify resisting selling or development pressures?

Are there any alternatives to their cropping system?



A boy examines a map with multiple land ownerships for the map and compass exercise. (courtesy IDL)

Hitz said students struggled with the current issue problem as presented, especially with the concept of fallowing (resting) some cropland, Hitz said. "Students from the Palouse knew

about the concept of fallowing a field, but students from Southern Idaho weren't as familiar with it," he said

Nevertheless, students took their best shot at a plan and presented it during the oral presentations along with visual aids, maps of the cropping systems, etc.

"I thought the students did well trying to address the current issue question," added Steven Smith, who co-chaired the Envirothon with Hitz. "We did hear from students that it was harder than in other

years, but I thought they did pretty darn well getting into the nitty-gritty details of running a hypothetical farm."



Students get their hands dirty at the soils station at the State Forestry Contest (courtesy IDL).

At the State Forestry Contest, after the students ran through the 10 stations, they took a break for lunch and then they had some time to learn about careers in natural resources. Western States Equipment brought a mini-excavator that students could take turns learning how to operate.

"That was really fun for the kids to try that," Homik said.

The University of Idaho College of Natural Resources had a booth for the career fair along with North Idaho College, Idaho Forest Group, Potlatch Deltic, U.S. Forest Service,

Associated Logging Contractors, Idaho Department of Lands, including fire prevention outreach, fire and forestry, Stimson Lumber Co., and Inland Empire Paper Co.

Hammond said some of his students have expressed interest in a forestry career. He has helped them job-shadow professionals to learn more. "I've tried to explain to them that forestry is an art," he says. "It's a way to introduce them to something they could enjoy as a career in N. Idaho. I know it's been a great career for me."

Organizers hope that more schools

and students could participate in both events to give kids more insight into natural resources.

"We'd love to see more participation from schools south of the Salmon River," Homik said.

"We are looking for more teams to participate from Southwest Idaho and Northern Idaho," added Hitz, "but we need to do more outreach with the schools in those areas to make them aware of the opportunity."

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.

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