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Two teams representing Ravenswood Future Farmers of America (FFA) won first and second place in the 2016 West Virginia Grasslands Evaluation contest at Jackson's Mill, April 8. Cabell Midland FFA placed third. Teresa Riffle, Ravenswood FFA had the highest individual score overall.

"The first team we sent from West Virginia to the National competition won," said Jim Foster, West Fork Conservation District Vice-Chair. "One of the best things we've done for the young people here is this competition. It teaches them about the natural, renewable resources and how they are beneficial to their livelihood."

The competition is open to all high school level Future Farmers of America members or 4-H chapters in the state. The contest takes place each year during the West Virginia Beef Expo. The team will represent West Virginia in the National competition scheduled to take place in Missouri in June.

"Many of the students that participate in the competition pursue careers in the agriculture field, whether with NRCS, Farm Service Agency or teaching," said Shawn Hill, Agriculture teacher and Monroe County FFA advisor. "Ninety percent of these kids live on a farm and once they are out of school the majority of them will go back to the farm."

Hill participated in the contest as a high school student through 4-H activities. In 2004, his team won both the state and national contests. Hill said he now pays his success forward by teaching and coaching the Monroe County teams.

Typically, teams consist of four members and are allowed twenty-five minutes to judge each of four segments of the contest with three minutes to move between judging sites. The contest runs for approximately two hours.

"The Grassland Evaluation Contest consists of four segments where the participants have to evaluate the pasture condition as it is," said Gary Redden, NRCS District Conservationist. "These sections include grassland condition, soil interpretation, wildlife habitat, and plant identification. Each factor must be considered in evaluating pastures to best utilize the resource and to help make useful management decisions."

The contestants first determine the condition of the field then make corrective decisions based on sound agricultural practices compatible with the landowner's goals. They look for what kind of grass is growing, find the percentage of legumes and determine the stocking rate, Redden added.

Each contestant is also given a scenario that provides a quantity and type of livestock a landowner has and must see if the forage matches the livestock. If the two do not match the contestant is required to give recommendations to the landowner to make their operation work.

For the soil interpretation section, students are supplied with an aerial photograph with boundaries outlined with all the map units. They answer questions based on the specific type of soil in their area. They then determine the soil type by using the Soil Survey, following the map unit descriptions and horizons and then the interpretation page.

In 2003, Barbara Greenleaf, NRCS Grasslands Specialist, began participating in the contest by assisting with the plant identification section. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Appalachian Plant Materials Center in Alderson provided 25 plant samples for the contest.

“It is important the kids know the species of the plants in order to properly manage their grassland,” said Greenleaf. “It helps increase the nutritional quality of the fields if they can identify and properly manage grasses, legumes and weeds.”

For the plant identification section the contestants study the plants in various stages. Without being able to touch the plant, students must identify the plant name and stage of maturity. All plants are native to West Virginia and can be found in pasture settings. The final section, wildlife habitat, contestants answer questions relating wildlife to farming activities.

“The majority of these kids will acquire land and have some critters on it,” said Jim Hill, retired NRCS Grassland Specialist. “Through this competition these kids will gain the skills and resources they’ll need to manage a farm on their own.”

The West Virginia Conservation Agency and Conservation Districts organize and administer the contests for the state. Hill and Foster were key players in bringing the competition to West Virginia sixteen years ago with the help of Redden.

Redden, who was at a conference years ago, heard about the grasslands evaluation contest and proposed the idea of creating a contest here. Partner organizations and local groups showed interest so Redden traveled to a competition in Missouri to learn more in 2000. The next year, the first contest was held in West Virginia.

There were nine teams competing with a total of 34 contestants from four West Virginia counties: Cabell, Harrison, Jackson, and Monroe Counties. Scholarships were awarded to the top two teams as well as the student with the highest individual score.

Members of the Ravenswood FFA Team Two: Andy Hoscher, Colby Marks, Delana McCoy, and Jonathan Tanner each received a \$500 scholarship. Members of the Ravenswood FFA Team One: Fiona Lane, Gabriela Martinez, Katlyne Rollyson, and Megan Walter each received a \$250 scholarship. Teresa Riffle of Ravenswood FFA Team Three had the highest individual score overall and received a \$500 scholarship.

Ravenswood FFA had four teams competing in the contest along with two teams from Cabell Midland FFA, one team from Monroe County FFA, Liberty FFA and Ripley FFA. For more information, go to www.wvca.us/education/grassland_contest.cfm or contact your local Conservation District.