

SOIL AND PLANT SCIENCE DIVISION

Technical Soil Services

South Central Soil Survey Region

Nacogdoches, Texas, and Ruston, Louisiana, Soil Survey Offices (SSOs)

East Texas Future Farmers of America (FFA) Contests

Purpose

Each spring ushers in a new season of growth and the promise of fresh beginnings. Plants poke new leaves out of the ground, trees blossom in an explosion of color, and hundreds of FFA and 4-H students flock to fields, forests, and pastures to participate in various judging contests. The FFA and 4-H chapters bring school-aged children to judging contests hosted by local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). These contests prepare students for careers in environmental sciences.

One of the most highly anticipated events for students is the soil judging contests. For each contest, NRCS soil scientists work with local District Conservationists, technicians, and planners to dig holes, evaluate texture and other soil characteristics, select sites, and designate slopes in preparation for the big days.

Background

The Nacogdoches and Ruston SSOs helped two NRCS and SWCD field offices with the contest set ups the week of March 18–22, 2024. Each contest contained four sites, which provided NRCS soil scientists the opportunity to create different scenarios for soil judges. Twenty minutes are allotted at each site for students to complete their assessment and fill out scorecards.

Red River County SWCD's contest centered around a pasture occasionally used for cattle. Small-scale beef cattle operations are one of the most common agriculture production uses of land in Red River County. The contest's unique challenge was the inclusion of a small gully leading to a livestock pond. This gave students the opportunity to identify erosion and suggest a solution to prevent. The ability to do both is crucial not only in a soils contest but also in real world scenarios.

The Bowie County SWCD contest is held each year at Wright Patman Lake, a popular recreation destination and home to Atlanta State Park. Pine and hardwood trees surround the approximately 30,000 acres of the lake, providing a vastly different set of soils than students experienced in Red River County. Steeper slopes and higher water tables at some of the sites provided a distinct challenge for judges to navigate (figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1.—Using a laser level to set up slope stakes.



Figure 2.—Digging a small soils contest pit.

Key Outcomes

The soil judging contests provide NRCS staff with opportunities to strengthen relationships with local partners and to expose children of all ages to agricultural and environmental sciences and the career possibilities that lie within these fields. Soil judging contests also prepare students to identify various soil issues and how they can be remedied, including erosion, excessive wetness, and flooding. Awareness of positive soil management at a young age encourages and teaches these future landowners and producers how to proactively care for their own natural resources.