

Green County Success from the Field

High School Students Learn About Soils

Each year Future Farmers of America (FFA) students from across Wisconsin compete in various local land judging contests to learn about soils and conservation practices. A state contest is historically rotated in cooperation with Farm Technology Days allowing students to see different soil types from around the state. This contest qualifies the top five teams to compete at the National Land and Range Judging Contest in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Competition among students and teachers is fierce to earn the honor of competing at nationals.

Land judging contests started many years ago with 4-H and FFA students competing to learn about soils and soil conservation. In Green County, Wisconsin, an annual summer contest has been held since 1968 where cooperation exists between the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Land Conservation Department, local businesses, and the Moose Lodge. Throughout the year, other contests are held in Southwest Wisconsin, including a spring contest at the University of Wisconsin Platteville, and a fall contest that rotates between Grant, Green and Lafayette counties. Another fall contest rotates between Dunn, Pepin, Buffalo and Pierce counties in Northwest Wisconsin, and a spring contest is held at the University of Wisconsin River Falls.

NRCS and Land Conservation staff select the site and prepare the contest working with a landowner and excavator to dig four soil pits about four feet deep, a few days prior to the contest. On contest day, students arrive and are assembled in four groups, one at each soil pit and evaluation area. A horn sounds and students are given 15 minutes to review each of the four soil pits for soil properties, estimated slope, rank land classes, recommend various conservation practices and evaluate soil limitations for construction practices.

"The most interesting thing is watching the students evaluate soil pits," said Jason Thomas, NRCS District Conservationist for Green County, "They really learn first-hand how erosion changed our landscape. Stream bottoms around here have up to six feet of post European settlement sedimentation. Witnessing this layer over the historically buried native soil is mind blowing to the students."



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Students competing in the Green County 2019 summer contest.

The state contest in 2019 was hosted by the Watertown High School on July 23 near Farm Technology Days. Monticello's Natalie Roe was the first place individual at the Wisconsin State FFA Soils Judging Contest. Sam Meier, of Black Hawk, placed second and Bailey Abney, of Black Hawk, placed third, leading their team to victory. In team results, Black Hawk placed first, Cassville second, Lancaster third, Monticello fourth, and Cashton fifth. These five teams qualified to attend the national contest in Oklahoma in May 2020.

"I started out soils judging with no idea what to do. Once I went to a contest and saw how much this relates to my family's business of crop farming, I was able to pick up on it very quickly," said Natalie Roe. "I found it really interesting and questioned my parents and agriculture teacher about soils judging. I am so glad I have been able to make it as far as I have in the competition aspect, and I know this will be able to help me in my future career."

"Land judging is an FFA event that I always enjoyed as a student at Monroe FFA. During that time (1995-1997), I was lucky enough to compete in several contests with the same goal as the others on my team...to qualify for nationals. That never happened," said Ryan Indergand, Monticello FFA advisor, "Since I was never able to qualify for national soils as a student, it's especially rewarding to be able to coach students like Natalie and see them continuously improve."

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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