



August 2009
Volume 47 Number 4
Article Number 4IAW3

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Crop-O-Rama: Exposing Youth to Educational and Career Opportunities in Agriculture

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Abstract: Crop-O-Rama is an educational event for 4-H and FFA students in high school or middle school. Participants compete as individuals or in teams in agricultural competitions including crop weed and seed identification, soils judging and land use, an agronomic quiz bowl, a "heroes in agriculture" speech and essay contest, and "science in agriculture" educational exhibits. The purpose is to expose youth to educational and professional opportunities in agriculture. An emphasis is placed on recruiting contest judges and helpers currently employed in various sectors of agri-business to interact with participants regarding educational and employment opportunities in agriculture.

Background

Enrollments in Colleges of Agriculture nationally have decreased in the last 20 years, despite the employment opportunities for college graduates in the food and agriculture economic sectors (Russell, 1993). It is important to recruit, educate, and graduate students in agriculture and food science academic programs to keep a viable agriculture industry in the U.S. One potential source for future college students and industry employees is the thousands of FFA and 4-H club members in the United States. These students participate in competitive events each year that often require them to travel to college campuses.

Career development events (CDE) were designed by FFA to prepare students for careers in agriculture (National FFA Handbook, 2006). There are 24 CDE, including Prepared Public Speaking, Ag Communications, and Agronomy. Crop-O-Rama is a middle school and high school agricultural competition originally developed in 1982 and implemented by the Department of Crop and Soil Sciences at Michigan State University to recruit students to campus and encourage their interests in agriculture careers. Crop-O-Rama is held annually in conjunction with the University's Agricultural and Natural Resources

Week, which coincides with the Michigan FFA annual spring convention at the campus of Michigan State University. The 2008 Crop-O-Rama, held March 5, attracted 200 participants representing 19 middle and high school FFA programs located throughout the state. The objective of Crop-O-Rama is to use an interactive competition to expose youth to educational opportunities in agriculture. Also, Crop-O-Rama provides students with an opportunity to network with agricultural professionals assisting with the Crop-O-Rama activities.

Program Description

Students participate in one or more of five total competitions, which include the following.

- **Weed and Crop Identification:** Live crop and weed plant and seed samples as well as common crop defects are provided for students to correctly identify. This competition has direct links to some sections of the Agronomy CDE (National FFA Handbook, 2006).
- **Soils Judging and Land Use:** Participants examine soil monoliths and soil samples for texture and natural drainage and answer written questions on soil survey information. This competition helps students to develop expertise in one section of the Environmental and Natural Resources CDE.
- **Heroes in Agriculture (Speech and Essay):** Students prepare an essay on an agricultural hero's life and accomplishments prior to the competition and present the information in a speech to judges at the Crop-O-Rama. This competition is linked to the Prepared Public Speaking CDE.
- **Science in Agriculture (Exhibits):** Youth prepare and submit an exhibit on describing a current trend or issue in agriculture. Submissions include posters, three-sided, and table-top exhibits.
- **Agronomic Quiz Bowl:** Teams of 4 representing their respective schools compete against each other in a "Jeopardy" like competition.

Industry Support

To meet the program objective of exposing students to agricultural careers, representatives from a cross-section of agri-business are recruited as volunteer workers and judges for the five competitions. Additionally, financial support for team and individual prizes as well as a soda and pizza lunch is provided by several of the state's agricultural commodity grower organizations. In return, a report and promotional imagery are provided to the commodity organizations. Additionally, graduate students from the Crop and Soil Sciences department and members from the undergraduate Agronomy Club help with the program, as well as teachers and volunteers from the school districts that bring the students to the Michigan State campus for the event. Industry volunteers and graduate students are encouraged to interact with students about their own college experiences in agricultural related degree programs.

Educational Component

The emphasis of the program is on education. Students competing in Crop-O-Rama study and then compete in various subject areas that encompass four CDE that students may return to campus and compete in late

April, 6 to 7 weeks following Crop-o-Rama. Competitions such as Crop-O-Rama teach students responsibility and build self-confidence and self-worth (Radhakrishna, Everhart, & Sinasky, 2006). In addition to the individual and inter-school competition, students are provided with Web-based preparatory information. Educational advisors associated with the competing schools are encouraged to utilize the information provided on the Web site as a teaching aide in their school's agri-science, FFA, and 4-H programs.

Exposure to Careers in Agriculture

Agri-business representatives helping with the program are given the opportunity to converse with participants about their particular employment during the pizza lunch/award ceremony, which is conducted in a classroom auditorium. The representatives serving as judges also present the awards to individuals and teams competing in their respective competitions. Additionally, ample time is provided for one-on-one conversations and consultations with individual contestants throughout the day. Undergraduate and graduate student volunteers from the department and the department's Agronomy Club address the youth on curricular and extra-curricular opportunities at Michigan State University. Finally, students view a short informational PowerPoint presentation on career opportunities and degree programs available at Michigan State University while they enjoy their lunch.

Involvement of FFA and 4-H Programs

The number of FFA chapters and 4-H programs that bring students to the Crop-o-Rama has steadily grown in recent years to the current level of 200 participants. The participating FFA advisors and school volunteers regard Crop-O-Rama as a great venue to expose students to agriculture and Michigan State University, to give students an opportunity to compete CDE areas prior to the CDE competitions in late April, and to meet agriculture industry personnel that provide students with information on agricultural careers.

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