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Middle Republican Natural Resources District

2/28/2006

For Immediate Release

Students Work as Teams to Test Their Knowledge About Natural Resources

Curtis – In 1995 the third largest use for surface water in Nebraska was for irrigation. What was the most common use for surface water?

A. Hydroelectric power. B. Domestic use. C. Livestock. D. Fossil Fuel Power.

Nearly 50 students answered that question at the Mid-Plains Regional Envirothon competition, held recently at the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture in conjunction with the FFA Region XII Skills Contest. Ten teams from seven area schools participated in this year's contest.

Winning the competition with 130 points was the Hayes Center High School team. Team members are senior José Dimas, juniors Keith Johnson and Stefani Yeager, and sophomores Erik Anderjaska and Lance Wach. Their team sponsor is Terry Wortman. With this win the Hayes Center team automatically qualifies for the Nebraska Envirothon on May 6 near Hastings.

The Wauneta Palisade High School team, who were the 2005 Regional winners and State contest runners-up, took a close second at the contest with 127 points. Teams members include sophomores Katie Erickson, Brennan Keiser, Jesse Skelton, and Stacey Wright, and junior Luke Wright. The team sponsors are Teresa Hayes and Dan Andrews.

Mid Plains Regional Envirothon Coordinator Kara Gall said, "Both teams are groups of really bright kids. Last year Wauneta Palisade beat out Hayes Center by 3 points. This year Hayes Center came out on top, by exactly 3 points. But what is most impressive is that both teams improved their overall scores by more than 10 points."

Both teams attended the second annual Envirothon training session at the McDonald-Belton Campus of Mid Plains Community College in North Platte earlier in February. The training session, which was attended by nearly 50 students and teachers, was organized by the Middle Republican and Twin Platte Natural Resources Districts. Students spent time learning from area professionals about environmental issues, ecosystems, and topography.

The Envirothon is a program for 9th-12th grade students to learn more about the natural environment. Teams may be composed of FFA students, science students, 4-H members, or any student interested in natural resources. The contest tests students' knowledge on subjects such as soils, aquatics, forestry, wildlife, range, environmental policy, and one special topic of national interest. This year's special topic is "Water Stewardship in a Changing Climate." In order to qualify for the Nebraska Envirothon Contest, 5-member teams must first compete at a regional contest. The winning teams from each regional contest, plus eight wildcard teams, are invited to the Nebraska State Envirothon Competition. Winners of the state competition, held May 6, will advance to the Canon Envirothon, scheduled to be held this year in Canada.

Wildcard teams are invited statewide according to the eight highest scores following the regional winners. According to Gall, chances are good that both the Ogallala Black Team (sophomores Robert Ruhlman and Beck Andrews, junior Nathan Eveland, seniors Chris Campbell and Derek Dikeman, sponsor Mabelle Havenridge), who took 3rd at the contest with 116 points and the Medicine Valley Team (seniors Jacoba Nutt, Kay Kaczor, Paige Bek, Brenen Hammond, Matt Wiest, sponsor Tonya Pick), who took 4th with 114 points, may both receive wild card invitations to the state contest.

"We should hear more after the last regional contest March 8," said Gall.

Designed for students who want to get "up-close and personal" with North America's natural resources, the Envirothon Program began in Nebraska in 1992. The program offers both in-class curriculum and hands-on field experiences focused around ecology, natural resource management, and current environmental issues. Beck Andrews, a sophomore from Ogallala High School says, "The Envirothon represents an opportunity to learn about ecology and the environment through competition. It's different from other events I participate in because we are there to learn, not just to test knowledge."

More than a simple test, the Envirothon encourages students to work collaboratively as a team, to exercise their training and problem-solving skills, and to learn that cooperation among team members is key to

achieve knowledge on subjects such as soils, aquatics, forestry, wildlife, range, policy, and a special national environmental issue. It is this aspect of teamwork that Katie Erickson, a sophomore at Wauneta Palisade High School, likes about the Envirothon competition. “The Envirothon is different from other events I participate in because it is a team effort. It allows us to use everyone’s strengths and knowledge to our advantage.”

One of the things that both area teachers and students enjoy about the Envirothon is the integrated aspect of the competition. Teresa Hayes, a science teacher at Wauneta Palisade High School, and one of the sponsors for the Wauneta Palisade Envirothon team, says, “As a science teacher, I tend to focus on basic sciences like biology, chemistry and physical science. I touch on integrated aspects of Natural Resources but I have many other topics I need to cover. I choose to bring a team of students to the Envirothon precisely because it is multi-disciplinary. It’s a great way to interconnect all the different disciplines.”

Hayes makes a good point. There is no integrated Natural Resources curriculum in the high school classrooms. Most of students that comprise Envirothon teams do not have classes together. They either meet before or after school to study. There is a lot of independent study involved as well. Some of the students, this next generation of conservationists, are concerned that natural resources education is not a priority for Nebraska schools.

Brennan Keiser, a sophomore at Wauneta Palisade, says, “I asked four students in my class if they knew what DEQ stood for, a fundamental natural resources agency, and they all answered no. Three out of four of them did not know what NRD stood for. I have a feeling this would be the same for most high school students throughout the state. I think it is really important for High School students to learn more about the natural environment because my peers and I are the future. We can’t manage it if we don’t understand it. Water resources will only dwindle more, so we need to know about it.”

Georgia Andrews, a junior from Ogallala High School, agrees with Keiser. “Natural Resources should be a priority for schools in Nebraska because Nebraska has unique resources and students should learn about them as part of their education about their state.”

Envirothon awards were given for the teams that scored highest in each of the individual topic areas. Wauneta-Palisade won the Soils topic and tied with Hayes Center in the Forestry division.

Hayes Center won the Range and Aquatics Division and tied with the Ogallala Orange Team (sophomore Samantha Grimsley, junior Georgia Andrews, seniors Catherine Ruhlman and Kaitlin Ruldolph, sponsor Machel Havenridge) for the Special Topic.

The Ogallala Black Team was the winner of the Policy contest.

Winning the Wildlife Topic was Southwest High School, a team comprised of sophomores Robert Blume, Jeremy Brooks, and Micheal Dack, and juniors Tyler Brooks and Nick Dunn. Southwest High School's sponsor is Les Roggenkamp.

Other teams competing at the contest were Gothenburg High School and Arapahoe-Holbrook High School.

Sponsors for the Envirothon program are: Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Nebraska Forest Service, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission, Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality, Society for Range Management, University of Nebraska IANR, Nebraska Department of Education and the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources.

And the answer to the opening question? A. Hydroelectric Power.

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For more information contact

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Mid Plains Regional Envirothon winners: Hayes Center High School: Left to right: Sponsor Terry Wortman, Jose Dimas, Lance Wach, Erik Anderjaska, Stefani Yeager, and Keith Johnson



Mid Plains Regional Envirothon Runners-Up: Wauneta Palisade High School Left to right: Jesse Skelton, Luke Wright, Katie Erickson, Brennan Keiser, Stacey Wright



Southwest Team

Wildlife Topic Winners:

Front Row- Nick Dunn and Jeremy Brooks

Back Row- Robert Blume, Tyler Brooks, Micheal Dack