

Extension helps students learn about crop science

Written by Gothenburg Times
Thursday, 26 August 2010 14:18 -

At 9 feet, stalks of corn tower high along Nebraska highways and byways, more so than any other row crop. Yet many Nebraskans have little knowledge about the state's No. 1 crop or its end uses -- the same goes for No. 2 ranking soybeans.

Brandy VanDeWalle, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension educator based in Geneva, is striving to change that. The Crop Science Investigation workshop series she teaches to fourth-through 12th-graders helps them explore such career possibilities as farming, insurance, banking, research and soil or water conservation, as well as the principles of crop science.

"We learn basic science first, then apply it," she said of the monthly workshop offered March through September. CSI curricula includes materials originating from Iowa State University, which VanDeWalle is adapting for her Nebraska audiences.

CSI seeks to help attract youth to agricultural sciences in light of the number of retiring farmers, and to supplement state and national Extension efforts to promote science, engineering and technology.

Lessons build on each other yet can stand alone so a participant can learn at any stage, she said, adding that participants help each other.

Youth learn how plants grow and the process of plant emergence, the importance of germination rates and calculating germination percentages, and how to identify the growth stages of corn and soybeans.

They discover uses for both crops include soaps, plastics, pharmaceuticals and oils, in addition to fuel and food.

They also discuss the importance of the crops for their community, state and nation. Nebraska ranks first nationally in production of Great Northern beans, second in pinto beans and proso millet, third in corn and grain sorghum, and fifth in soybeans.

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A National Agricultural Statistics Service report shows in 2009 Nebraska produced more than 1.575 billion bushels of corn and more than 259 million bushel of soybeans for a combined value of more than \$8.267 billion.

Most CSI members are 4-H'ers, FFA'ers or both, but the fact that two youth had no agricultural background was no deterrent.

"They've really had a strong interest," VanDeWalle said.

CSI also has practical applications. At least one participant uses her CSI knowledge to monitor crop irrigation sensors and relay to her father how much irrigation water to apply and when.

CSI can be used by other Extension educators, as well as vocational agriculture instructors, as VanDeWalle has started to create and post lessons for others to teach. She also would like to see the program include other Nebraska crops.

UNL Extension is part of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.