

## **Establishing A Forage Evaluation Contest for Youth**

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Friendly competition can be a great motivator toward achieving excellence in a given discipline. Since the early 1930s, FFA Career Development Events (CDEs) have built upon what is learned in agricultural classes and encouraged members to put their knowledge into practice. These events are designed to help a member prepare for a career in agriculture by testing and challenging the student's technical, leadership, interpersonal and teamwork skills as well as their knowledge of the subject matter. CDEs answer the question, "When and how will I use this knowledge in the real world?"

Due to necessary commitment of resources and personnel, currently, several institutions host the various career development events at the state level in Texas, listed below:

- Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo - Tractor Tech
- Stephen F. Austin Experimental Forest (NRCS) - Forestry
- Texas Tech University - Ag. Communications, Agronomy, Cotton, Entomology, Food Sci, Horse, Plant ID & Wool
- Region III - State Wildlife CDE
- Tarleton State University - Dairy Cattle, ENR, Homesite, Land, Milk Quality & Rangeland
- Sam Houston State University - Ag. Mech, Ag. Sales, FBM, Floriculture, Forage Evaluation, Marketing Plant & Nursery/Landscape
- Texas A&M University - Livestock, Meats, Poultry & Vet Science

The Texas Forage Evaluation CDE was started as a new contest in 2002. The first year 11 teams competed in the contest at the state level. Twenty-nine teams participated in 2010 and a record 55 teams competed in 2018. It has become quite popular, with over 200 high school student participants each year.

The contest consists of four components: Plant ID (worth 300 points), Hay Judging (300 points), Quiz (300 points), and Problem Solving (100 points). Participants have 25 minutes to complete each component. There are 59 species on the Plant ID list, including a variety of common native and introduced grasses, forage legumes, and weed and brush species. I provide a compact disk with hundreds of photos illustrating identifying features of the various species for a small fee. In the hay judging component, there are four placing classes and 10 hay samples that must be graded for maturity, texture, leafiness, color and foreign matter. The species that may be included in the hay judging component include bermudagrass, bahiagrass, sorghum-sudangrass, alfalfa, mixed grasses, ryegrass, and other winter annual grasses. We developed a handbook on Hay Selection and Evaluation Guidelines, which is provided through the Texas FFA website as a downloadable PDF.

The quiz component includes 30 multiple choice questions derived from the information in two or three chapters of the Southern Forages book by Ball, Hoveland, and Lacefield. The problem-solving component requires mathematical calculations based on practical agricultural situations, such as fencing, fertilization, bale storage, agrochemical applications and others. There are 10 questions on this portion of the contest and students are provided with scratch paper and inexpensive calculators on this section.

While there are national competitions for most of the other FFA career development events, there is not one dealing with forage crops. Youth education in agriculture through FFA and 4-H activities is responsible for the excellent reputation farmers enjoy in this country. Perhaps it is time for AFGC to step in, sponsor and work on the establishment of a forage-based CDE for national competition.

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