Idaho 4-H Rangeland Skill-a-thon: increasing youth education in rangelands

**AT A GLANCE**

By teaching rangeland concepts to 4-H youth, we are increasing their awareness of complex issues that surround the landscapes of Idaho rangelands.

**The Situation**

Over half of Idaho is classified as rangelands with both private and public land management agencies as stewards. Because of this robust ecosystem that surrounds us, there is a need to educate both youth and adults about the opportunities and challenges on rangelands. Rangelands provide multiple uses including livestock grazing, recreation, research, wildlife habitat and plant ecosystem functions.

**Our Response**

The Idaho 4-H Rangeland Skill-a-thon was first launched in 2015 as a one-day event to educate youth through competition, educational speakers and hands-on activities. The event included guest speakers, a ranch tour and competitions that youth teams prepared for prior to attending. In 2016 and 2017, the event expanded to an overnight excursion. The youth teams learn about rangeland challenges and opportunities and prepared to compete in: 1) plant and animal identification, 2) soil texturing and 3) range management. Each year, a different focus or topic area is determined by the Rangeland Skill-a-thon committee; these topic areas focus on real-life challenges that occur on rangelands as described next. Each team then prepares an oral presentation and 3-D diorama of their interpretation of the topic area. To account for the diversity of Idaho’s rangelands, the Rangeland Skill-a-thon has changed locations each year depending on the identified topic area.

Previous locations and topics:

- **2015** (Cambridge, Idaho): teams needed to protect sage grouse habitat (including leks), while maintaining a livestock grazing operation on the same land.
- **2016** (McCall, Idaho): teams needed to graze livestock in close proximity to wolves.
- **2017** (Challis, Idaho): teams needed to protect endangered fish species in streams and rivers that were used for irrigation and water for their ranch.
Program Outcomes
As we continue to gather data on the impacts the Rangeland Skill-a-thon has created, our planning team has noticed that it’s not only the youth participating in the competition that are learning, but also the adult volunteers and family members. The adult volunteers and families are encouraged to participate and listen to the guest speakers and attend the field tours. Preliminary survey information indicates an increase in knowledge in both youth and adult attendees. Participants have developed a greater understanding of the mutually beneficial aspects of livestock grazing and wildlife habitat. In addition, participants worked to develop livestock grazing strategies to minimize livestock depredation. To date over 150 youth and adult participants have attended the three rangeland skill-a-thons held throughout southern Idaho. We have also brought together five Extension faculty, four government agencies and a private research endowment to identify rangeland education priorities, develop appropriate curriculum, and conduct educational activities that serve a growing clientele base who are interested in learning more about Idaho rangelands.

The Future
The 2018 Rangeland Skill-a-thon will be located in the Camas Prairie area of northern Idaho in late September. The focus area will be announced in May to provide each team equal opportunities to prepare for the competition. The time of year has been changed (previously held in June) to better accommodate the 4-H calendar and to also invite statewide FFA teams to compete. Recently, a volunteer training was completed at the 4-H State Volunteer Forum in Pocatello, and there are upcoming teen and volunteer trainings planned throughout 2018. There is also a curriculum for both youth and adult coaches currently being peer reviewed.

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