

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Idaho's 4-H shooting sports: teaching youth, building safer communities

AT A GLANCE

Teaching the appropriate, ethical and responsible use of firearms and archery equipment is essential to ensure the personal safety of youth and enhance the well-being of our communities.

The Situation

Idaho's population continues to shift; most residents now live in an urban or suburban setting. A generation or more ago, youth typically learned proper, safe gun handling practices from family members in rural settings; those opportunities are dwindling.

Without experience and training, individuals can fail to learn essential skills and the tremendous responsibilities associated with the appropriate use of firearms and archery equipment. That deficiency can place youth and others around them at substantially higher risk.

While the 4-H Shooting Sports program was introduced in Idaho during the late 1990s, by 2011, our youth enrollment had plateaued within the six available discipline areas (archery, hunting, muzzleloader, pistol, rifle and shotgun). Recognizing a vast potential audience who could benefit from the education and safety practices imparted, an innovative approach was needed to spark increased participation.

Our Response

In late 2015, four new statewide area 4-H Extension educators were hired. Jim Wilson, who served the 10 northern district counties, was also assigned the 4-H



Shooting a round of trap is just one of the many exciting options available to 4-H shooting sports members. Photo: Carrie Stark.

shooting sports coordinator role. Several potential limitations were identified based on consultation with counterparts in other states.

A 4-H shooting sports plan was developed to guide organizational structure and future programming. In addition, a 4-H shooting sports advisory team was created to garner expertise from more experienced, advanced (level 2) volunteer instructors statewide. Their input prioritized three near-term action items.

First, clear, consistent rules were needed to govern all competitive events within each discipline area. Then there was a need for more effective communication across the entire program. Finally, we needed to expand beginning (level 1) instructor training accessibility throughout the entire state.

While education and development of critical life skills among youth remain our primary objective, providing opportunities for recreational and consistent competitive events are essential to stimulate increased participation.

Since safety is paramount, a certified instructor must always be physically present for youth to engage in 4-H shooting sports activities. Thus, if we are to reach more youth, we must expand our instructor base.

Program Outcomes

Despite 2020 and 2021 COVID limitations, over 40 level 1 instructor trainings have been conducted throughout Idaho since 2016, resulting in 753 discipline certifications. Instructors must complete a 12-hour training for each discipline they wish to teach, consisting of three to four hours of youth development and risk management and eight to nine hours of discipline-specific training.

To minimize costs for potential instructors, Wilson led a team to develop a series of online LMS modules that can be completed in advance, thus enabling the complete training to be done in just a single day. These modules, adopted by the National 4-H Shooting Sports Committee, were launched nationwide in November 2019. As a result, over 1,800 completions were registered by October 2021, and use continues to grow rapidly.

Starting in 2016, we bridged the youth project enrollment plateau with a steady increase (24%) through 2019. While COVID restrictions hampered involvement in 2020, in 2021, youth project enrollments in the 4-H Shooting Sports program skyrocketed 82% over 2019 figures (to nearly 1,100), making it one of the top 10 projects areas within University of Idaho Extension 4-H Youth Development program.

Guided by the development and updating of consistent 4-H shooting sports rules, we have transitioned from an archery-only event in 2016 with 21 youth to a state shoot in 2021 featuring six disciplines (compound ar-

chery, recurve archery, air pistol, air rifle, smallbore rifle and shotgun) with over 100 youth participants.

While the 2020 National 4-H Shooting Sports Championships were canceled due to COVID, Idaho fielded their first teams in 2018 and has qualified 10 teams (40 individuals) to this prestigious event through 2021. In addition, Idaho youth have continued to improve among the standings nationwide, including our first-ever “top five” overall team award in any of the nine discipline areas — congratulations to the 2021 air rifle team.

We enhanced program communications by launching and maintaining a comprehensive 4-H Shooting Sports [website](#). The distribution of periodic blast emails to volunteer instructors and paid personnel are used to supplement website information and address late-breaking news.

The Future

The 4-H Shooting Sports program will provide essential education, resources and learning opportunities that enable all youth to appropriately and safely utilize firearms and archery equipment. In addition, the physical and emotional well-being of families and our communities are at stake.

As we continue developing innovative methods to reach more youth and strive to provide the support that expands state and national opportunities, we welcome interested individuals and businesses to contribute to that success if they so choose.

The left-hand menu “Donations & Donors” tab of 4-H Shooting Sports [website](#) is a link to the University of Idaho Giving page. There you can choose to support these efforts by scrolling down or typing in “4-H shooting sports” within the designation drop-down menu.

The 4-H Shooting Sports program continues to be the fastest growing project area within our state and is quickly recognized for our contributions and achievements nationwide.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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