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Busloads of FFA students judge soil in competition



Four school buses and some of the dozen-plus other vehicles that transported people involved in a multi-county FFA event on Friday morning (Feb. 1) are seen from a public road. These vehicles were parked well into private property that is posted 'No Trespassing.' One intrepid journalist meandered onto the land and was granted permission to cover the event by the property owner and the top administrator for the event.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © Feb. 1, 2019 at 4:39 p.m.

LEVY COUNTY – Busloads of students from Citrus, Dixie, Gilchrist, Levy and Marion counties as well as more than a dozen pickup trucks and other vehicles with teachers, advisors, coaches, chaperones and other adults arrived at an undisclosed location in Levy County Friday (Feb. 1) morning as children competed in FFA land (soil) judging.

Some unidentified FFA students participate in the competition. A few areas from this photo were intentionally blurred to avoid any hope of identifying any student in particular, in the interest of fairness to some student who may be more noticed than some other student who was part of the event



that included scores of students from five counties. Four Bell, Lecanto and Dixie County FFA students are seen here.

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Field # 2 of four shows FFA members what they need to know as part of their competition.

(from left) John Stubblefield of the Gilchrist Soil and Water Conservation District; Leroy Crockett of the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (who is a regional soils scientist responsible for the northern half of Florida); and retired Levy County Extension Director



Albert Fuller stand on a hill away from the area being judged by FFA students. This is just one set of the many adults helping the youth learn many valuable lessons they can use from now through the rest of their lives. Some of the adults involved in this event were very, very camera shy.

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Ethan Church, a member of the Bronson High School Class of 2018, and the highest individual FFA Land Judging competitor in Levy County in 2018 (left) is seen next to Bronson Middle High School FFA Sr. Chapter Advisor Marcia Smith. Church was among the volunteers helping in this multi-county FFA event.



Lecanto Middle High School (Citrus County) FFA Advisor Steve Richardson and Dunnellon High School FFA Advisor (Marion County) Rebecca Keefer are two of the visiting counties' teachers who helped students learn at the event Friday.

A property owner who prefers anonymity made available a certain amount of acreage for this exercise in FFA education and competition, which is known as the Annual Tri-County FFA Land-Judging Event.

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John Stubblefield, a conservation technician who represents seven counties and is based in the Gilchrist Soil and Water Conservation District, is among the leaders who administered the event. While this is a Levy-Dixie-Gilchrist event, all FFA chapters are welcome, Stubblefield said.

And even though there is more than one county here, each county is only competing within its own four corners. There will be champion teams from each of the counties, and they will compete in Santa Rosa County later this year for the state title, he said.

Among the interests from Bronson assisting as a volunteer at this event on Friday was the young man who scored as the highest individual from Levy County last year. Ethan Church, a member of the Bronson High School Class of 2018, assisted BMHS FFA Chapter Advisor Marcia Smith and BMHS FFA Chapter Advisor Kelby Barber on Friday. Church went on to compete at the 2018 state event in Polk County.

Church intends to begin as a sophomore-junior at the University of Florida in July, where he will major in forestry and minor in soil sciences. He is beyond entering as a freshman, having earned college credit through dual enrollment.

Among the many other agricultural science teachers and FFA advisors, in addition to Smith and Barber, at this event were Bell High School FFA Chapter Advisor Bill Martin, BHS FFA Chapter Advisor Debbie Jones, Chiefland High School FFA Chapter Advisor Dallas Locke, Chiefland Middle School FFA Chapter Advisor Matthew Dettloff, Lecanto Middle High School (Citrus County) FFA Advisor Steve Richardson, Dixie County Middle High School FFA Advisor Kody Plemmons, DCMHS FFA Chapter Advisor Cynthia Mitchell, Dunnellon High School FFA Advisor (Marion County) Rebecca Keefer, Trenton High School FFA Chapter Advisor Ashley Thoron, THS FFA Chapter Advisor Heather Rucker, and from Williston Middle High School – FFA Advisors Natalie Couey, Shelby Rodgers, Austin Skipper, and University of Florida (a senior) intern Devon Morrison, and retired volunteer Ag Teacher and WMHS FFA Land Judging Team Coach Jack Halabrin.

Coach Halabrin was not the only retiree who was volunteering at this event. Among the stars from the category of retirees is retired Levy County Cooperative Extension Service Director and retired Levy County 4-H Agent Albert Fuller, who began his career when “cooperative” and “service” were parts of the name of that group, which serves residents and visitors in all 67 counties of the state.

From the list of other members of the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Services Extension interests at this event was current UF/IFAS Levy County Extension Director Ed Jennings.

The roster of people from the United States Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, various soil and water conservations districts and other academic and scientific interests at the event is intriguing. As far as members of The Fourth Estate, only one journalist who somehow happened to wander onto land that was marked with “No Trespassing” signs, was granted limited short-term access to find facts.

The scores of FFA students from the five counties are the individuals, though, who are the foundation and cornerstones for this event – judging land (or soil).

The students in the field and forest showed that they can evaluate four different and distinct pieces of land in regard to several profiles and characteristics. Their work is then compared to determine the best team from each county, and the best individual for this set of skills in each of those five Florida counties.

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This event is part of the FFA curriculum that helps these learners improve their ability to read land, not only for agricultural purposes, but for possible residential construction.

This in-the-field competition adds to the hands-on part of their learning about soil and water use and conservation.

As Citrus County FFA Advisor Richardson said, this skill set learned by these students helps them as they plan for the future – so they can “plan for grade 13,” because not every student goes to college.

Richardson said that not only do his students learn by doing, but he exposes them to recruiters from trade schools and universities who visit his classroom in Citrus County as part of their planning for grade 13 – the time after high school.

The students, teachers, advisors, coaches and others all completed their task before the end of the early afternoon and they vacated the undisclosed location, leaving little more than footprints and tire tracks to show they had traversed the soil of that area.