

Steers with windows in their stomachs? Firth high-schoolers help teach youngsters lessons about farms

By Lexie Heinle / World-Herald staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, March 17, 2015 1:00 am

FIRTH, Neb. — Hayden Jansen, 6, learned Monday at the Norris School District's second annual Ag Literacy Day that there are two types of cows: those that produce dairy and those that produce meat.

Hayden, a kindergartener, was one of the 1,000 students at the event here just south of Lincoln, where they heard about pigs, grain storage safety and fistulated steers, which have windows installed in their stomachs so researchers can test feed mixtures, among other things.

The event was organized by Norris High School students in an agricultural leadership class. Pupils from preschool through second grade wandered through a petting zoo, while students from the third through the fifth grades heard speakers from the agricultural industry, the Firth Fire Department and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

“There’s a big movement in agriculture to teach people where their food comes from,” said Lauren Ibach, who teaches Norris High’s agricultural leadership class. It exposes students who don’t live on farms to modern agriculture, she said. Even in the Norris FFA chapter, which also helped with the event, only about 10 percent of the members live on a farm.

In a survey the UNL Extension Service conducted at the event, about 40 percent of the students who responded said this was their first experience around livestock.

Curious elementary students asked whether pigs lay eggs, whether chocolate milk comes from brown cows and the ever popular, “Can you ride a cow?”

In 10-minute rotations, the younger students learned about nine animals, including a goat, rabbit and miniature horse.

The horse was 5-year-old Ansley Kohn’s favorite because “it’s soft.”

Her kindergarten teacher, Sandy Nieveen, said the students benefit from the hands-on learning.



Ag Literacy day

Norris Fifth-graders wait in line to honk the horn in a tractor on Monday during Ag Literacy Day.

Nieveen said she would have her 22 students write and draw about the experience, which also included sessions on grains and greenhouse plants.

Doug Malone, an agricultural teacher at Norris High for 31 years, said the event is a “win-win.” The elementary students learn more about agriculture, and the high school students gain leadership skills and confidence through teaching.

Malone also said teaching people about modern agriculture is a big issue. With the world’s population increasing, farmers are expected to feed more and more people, he said, yet the number of farms is decreasing.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the number of Nebraska farms fell by 47 percent from 1960 to 2014. Still, 91 percent of the state was farmland in 2014, and Malone said 1 in 4 Nebraska jobs involve agriculture.

Michelle Roman, a senior in the leadership class, plans on studying either agricultural business or medicine in college. As a child growing up in an urban area, she said, she didn’t know much about agriculture. That’s why events like this are needed, she said.

“It’s important to educate them to have a better background than I did,” she said.

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