

Lehigh Co. Teacher Wins State Award For Outstanding Agri-Science Program

BY SUZANNE KEENE

SCHNECKSVILLE — Because technology has changed the way food is produced, knowledge and skills in agri-science are vital for today's farmer.

Basic skills in production agriculture will no longer suffice. The farmer of the 80s and 90s will be using revolutionary technologies like estrus synchronization, embryo splitting and livestock confinement systems to boost ag production to ever higher levels.

To provide students with the competitive edge they will need to succeed in agricultural careers, vocational agriculture teachers are incorporating current agri-science technology into their curricula.

This week the National FFA honored several ag teachers for emphasizing agri-science technology in their instructional programs. Twelve regional finalists traveled to the FFA National Convention in Kansas City, Mo. to compete for the National Agri-Science Teacher of the Year Award.

Frederic Stillwagen, the state award winner in Pennsylvania and one of three Eastern Region finalists, was among those honored.

An agriculture teacher at Lehigh County AVTS, Stillwagen says, "I am very proud. I know there are a lot of other ag teachers doing as good a job as I am."

He believes the awards program will help to strengthen vocational agriculture in the schools and hopes the resulting publicity will help the public to understand agriculture better. "It's going to help ag and vo-ag education," Stillwagen said.

"I don't think the public knows what vocational agriculture is. They think it's cows, plows and sows."

But having worked as a vocational agriculture teacher for 15 years, Stillwagen realizes that his students will need to know more than how to fix a tractor when they graduate from high school.

"Ag is becoming more technical and will in the future also," he said.

His award winning curriculum takes a scientific approach to the study of lamb growth and development and involves the study of animal anatomy and physiology. The school's FFA chapter, Lehigh County FFA, owns and finances a flock of Southdown sheep used for the program.



Frederic Stillwagen, a vocational agriculture teacher at Lehigh County Area Vocational Technical School, has been named a state winner and a regional finalist in the National FFA Agri-Science Teacher of the Year Award Program.

Each student gets a lamb at birth and is required to take size and weight measurements and to record them on a bar graph.

The students follow their lamb's development closely for a year, taking measurements each week until the lambs are weaned. After weaning, the measurements are recorded each month.

Stillwagen and his students are searching for a growth pattern. If their study shows growth spurts at particular times, Stillwagen explained, they will know when to increase feed for peak efficiency.

The program also includes a study of the estrus cycle of seasonal breeds of sheep. By injecting ewes with hormonal treatments, Stillwagen and his students are trying to alter the estrus cycle for a two-lamb crop per year.

The demand for lamb has increased, he explained, but the supply is seasonal. If the hormonal injections are successful, a second lamb crop in the fall would be possible. "We're delving into it pretty good," Stillwagen said. The study of environmental factors like light and temperature is the next step in the program.

Stillwagen believes the program is good "because it develops the student's ability to think." In addition to taking the

measurements and recording them, students are required to analyze the results.

"We need to give them all-around skills," Stillwagen stressed. Employers are looking for workers who can think and who know how to work.

In addition to the skills he teaches in the classroom, Stillwagen says he strives to boost his students' self confidence. "A lot of kids don't realize how good they are," he said.

Pupils have an opportunity to test themselves in the vo-ag program and when they are successful they become more confident of their abilities.

The students are responsible for taking care of the sheep and they make all breeding decisions. The school's flock has three bloodlines and usually "holds its own" in shows, Stillwagen noted.

The emphasis is on homegrown animals and he encourages students to continue producing, rather than buying, winners after graduation.

As they pursue careers in agriculture or continue their studies at colleges or technical schools, Stillwagen's pupils will put to use the skills and confidence learned in the animal science program at Lehigh AVTS.



Stillwagen's award-winning curriculum revolves around the FFA chapter's flock of Southdown sheep. Here, he measures a ewe while students (from left) Wendy Rosenberger, Christine Frisch, Joe Kirk, Patty Hilbert and Dan Wehr, look on.

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