Current Status Of Linear Type Evaluation In Judging Contests

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From the Department of Dairy and Animal Science

This regular column from Penn State's Department of Dairy and Animal Science features the research findings, student opportunities, and resports on other important topics generated in the Department. The back issues of the column are archived on *Lancaster Farming's* Internet *www.lancasterfarming.com* home page. Look for them.

Dairy cattle judging contests have played an important role in the development of youth in the US for several decades. Judging contests help youth become better decision makers by forcing them to think on their feet. In addition, these contests provide excellent experience in oral communication. As a consequence, many people involved in youth education feel that the experience of participating in judging contests is very positive and that these contests play an important role in developing young leaders.

Dairy judging contests routinely require youth to place 6 to 12 classes of animals, with 4 animals in each class, and present oral reasons on 2 to 6 classes. This general format has not changed very much for at least 40 to 50 years in most areas of the US with the exception of inclusion of linear scoring in some contests sponsored by FFA. Livestock judging contests utilized a similar format to dairy contests until the 1980s when additional exercises were added to many livestock contests. These exercises include the inclusion of performance data along with the physical qualities of animals and additional groups of animals where some animals are designated as culls and others as keepers (keep/cull classes). In addition, livestock contests have had evaluation components for evaluating live animals for carcass traits.

Linear type evaluation began in dairy cattle in the early 1980s. It is safe to say that linear evaluation has changed dairy cattle breeding and selection dramatically. We now know more about the economic importance (or lack of economic importance) of physical characteristics in dairy cattle as a result of routine linear type trait evaluations. Currently, linear type traits are used in making sire selection decisions in breeding programs all around the world. In addition, linear type traits are used in a large part of the US dairy population for deciding which sires to use on specific cows, a practice called corrective mating by the breeding industry.

Although many judging contests have changed very little over the past several decades, the dairy industry has made enormous progress. Breeding and management programs have changed dramatically and this change has led many people to conclude that judging contests could be enhanced by the addition of new activities. At Penn State, we have included linear type evaluations in local contests for almost 10 years. Linear scoring has been added to traditional collegiate judging and evaluation courses at many universities. In recent years, linear type scoring has been an option for contestants at the PA All-American Dairy Cattle Judging Contest. Last year the national judging contest in Madison, WI experimented with an optional linear component. In 1999, collegiate coaches voted to exclude linear results in the overall rankings for the National Intercollegiate Dairy Judging Contest. Instead, awards for high contestants and teams for linear evaluation were presented. To this date, none of the major regional or national contests include the linear scoring component as part of the overall ranking of participants or teams with the exception of FFA contests. Contest managers and team coaches ultimately will decide if linear scoring will become an official part of judging contests.

Although linear type scoring in judging contests is very new, we have good information on how to handle the technical aspects of including linear scores in judging contests. Research at Penn State (in cooperation with the University of Florida and the University of Wisconsin) involving youth from several locations around the US has shown that contestants can be effectively ranked based on linear scores of 4 or more cows. Contestants should be handled in such a way to ensure that everyone has an unobstructed view of each cow, contestants should score one cow at a time, and contestants should move to subsequent cows in a systematic manner. Contestant linear scores can be easily evaluated by deviating their linear scores from official linear scores provided by experts on site; these deviations can be utilized to identify winning teams and individuals.

Inclusion of linear type scoring in major youth judging contests is very controversial at the moment. Many breeding companies support the concept of including linear scoring in contests because of the importance of linear scoring in the improvement of dairy cattle. However, the recent vote by collegiate coaches means that linear scoring will not be formally included in contests anytime soon. For now, it appears that collegiate students will have opportunities to compete in linear evaluation, but these opportunities will be separate from overall contest results that only include class placings and oral reasons.

NFO Endorses Pivotal Senate Concentration Bill

AMES, Iowa — Recently the National Farmers Organization (NFO) endorsed The Farmers and Ranchers Fair Competition Act, a Senate bill designed to combat growing economic concentration in agriculture.

"The nation's farmers and ranchers are laboring under incredible financial pressures, stemming, in part, from a lack of competition for their products," said National Farmers President Paul Olson. "In the last decade and a half, the farmers' share of the food dollar has shifted away from those producers into the hands of agribusiness, which is causing incredible economic hardship on those farm families."

Prices that determine producers' income for some ag commodities are at 25-year lows.

The Farmers and Ranchers Fair Competition Act would help control anticompetitive practices by multinational agribusinesses that hurt producers and would halt mergers that contribute to the economic devastation being encountered in rural America.

"The most critical component to the survival of independent producers are the prices they receive," Ag Policy Analyst Gene Paul emphasized. "Because of increased concentration in agriculture, markets are not open, fair or competitive, and these conditions must be reversed."

At its most recent national convention in January, National Farmers members ratified a resolution calling for an investigation and divestiture of corporations who control several segments of the food industry.

Representing agricultural producers since 1955, the farm organization has repeatedly spotlighted the growing anticompetitive climate, and believes the Senate bill could begin a trend toward restoring equitability to those who produce America's food and fiber.