

EXPANDING OUR REACH FOR YOUTH LIVESTOCK COMPETITIONS DURING A PANDEMIC

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When reviewing the Georgia 4-H calendar, eligible youth and their support systems traditionally had a plethora of diverse livestock opportunities from January to July. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, Georgia 4-H state and county faculty and staff partnered with Extension specialists from the University of Georgia Animal and Dairy Science and Poultry Science departments to create educational opportunities allowing 4-H'ers to participate and compete with their peers. While the opportunity to compete in a National Contest was unknown during a vast majority of the State Competitions, 4-H'ers continued to enter, compete, and be recognized for their accomplishments. From the outside, the event may have looked different but the end result was maintained - celebrating Georgia 4-H youth for their accomplishments and providing a platform for these youth to continue with their learned skills.

Through our 4-H programming, we are provided the opportunity to work alongside our youth members to produce educational competitive events. With the face to face programming opportunity removed during this time, we worked feverishly to offer alternative virtual experiences. Through the intuitive thinking and support of county offices, numerous events were coordinated and offered by the county level for statewide participation. Carole Knight, Madison County Agriculture and Natural Resource Agent, County Extension Coordinator offered a Virtual Poultry Judging Competition for eligible Northeast and Southeast 4-H'ers with Susannah Lanier, Bulloch County Extension Agent.

Knight shared, "With the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions, it became increasingly important to look for ways to offer Georgia 4-H'ers the same opportunities to participate in competitive events. Coaches and agents transitioned to practicing with their teams via Zoom to maintain social distancing while preparing for the contests. Although they were administered virtually, these events still taught important life skills like decision making, critical thinking, and public speaking."

County staff throughout the state continue to offer learning opportunities that challenge youth to learn about other options offered through Georgia 4-H. We have received numerous inquiries from counties that may not have had a past interest in a livestock or equine competition but through these virtual events, interest has been sparked. We hope that we will see increased participation in these activities in the future.

Throughout the United States, youth livestock shows were canceled, transitioned to a virtual platform, or continued face to face with enhanced protocols and procedures. Through the cooperative effort of Georgia 4-H, Georgia FFA, Georgia National Fairgrounds and Agricenter, and the Georgia Department of Agriculture (GDA), we have worked hard to provide safe and educational youth livestock exhibition opportunities. With the additional time at home to spend with their projects, many livestock exhibitors shared that the time with their animals helped defray some of the stress of the unknown and provide hope to participate in a State Show.



As we continue to navigate through the upcoming months, we are excited to continue to showcase the accomplishments of Georgia 4-H-not only our 4-H'ers, but also our county staff and volunteers. Through the pandemic, we were forced to be creative and step out of the shadows of tradition to maintain the opportunities that Georgia youth deserved.