

The Avon Park High School “Awesome Opossums” will go to the State Envirothon Competition

On December 12th, 2008, five students from Avon Park High School, “The Awesome Opossums,” traveled to Caloosahatchee Regional Park to compete in the Regional Envirothon competition. With the assistance of their instructor, Cheryl Moffat and staff from the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District, these youths earned the privilege of going to the next level. The State Envirothon competition will be held this year on April 25th at Hillsborough River State Park.

The Florida Envirothon is an outdoor, hands-on competition and education program for high school students that promotes good stewardship of the land, while giving students an awareness of environmental issues and human impacts. At Florida Envirothon competitions teams of five students are tested on five environmental areas (listed below) and compete for the highest cumulative score in the following areas:

- Aquatics — water ecology, water chemistry, water quality and aquatic life
- Forestry — tree identification, tree ecology, insects and disease and timber management
- Soils — classification, formation, soil properties, profiles and site suitability
- Wildlife — habitat, identification, food, disease and management
- Current Environmental Issues — annually selected topics such as air resources, nonnative invasive plants, or other current issues

“The mission of the Envirothon is to develop knowledgeable, skilled and dedicated citizens who are willing and prepared to work towards achieving and maintaining a natural balance between the quality of life and the quality of the environment. The Envirothon mission is accomplished by developing in young people an understanding of the principles and practices of natural resource management and ecology and through practice dealing with complex resource management decisions.”

Representing Highlands County in the 2009 Regional competition were 2 teams from Sebring High School and 1 team from Avon Park High School. Although all of the teams worked hard, studied and put forth a tremendous effort, Avon Park students Ashley Calhoun, Tyler Ann Cook, Cody Kindrick, Norma Badillo and Edwin Rivera scored the highest overall on the various tests and will go on to represent our county at the state level. They also won the first place plaque in the wildlife division of the competition.

Staff from the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District (HSWCD) work with the students in study sessions and use hands-on methods to help the students prepare for the competition. The teachers help out by combining their in-class curriculum with the subjects included in the Envirothon. This gives the students the opportunity to gain valuable knowledge about the environment and management principles and practices needed to protect our natural resources.

After participating in the Envirothon competition, many students have come away with a motivation and excitement to pursue careers in environmental studies, environmental law, natural sciences and natural resource management.

Not only is the Envirothon a great way to educate our youth about environmental issues, it is a chance to allow them to compete and learn about team work. The team of 5 must work

together; each covering a different subject, while working toward the same goal and sharing knowledge with each other.

It is also a chance for the kids to have some fun. The competitions are always held in a natural area, allowing the students to roam from station to station and see the environment up close and personal. A delicious picnic lunch is provided at each event, which allows all participants a time to unwind and relax after the tests are over.

We, at Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District are very proud of all of the students that have participated in Envirothon over the years. The Supervisors on the HSWCD board continue to support this valuable program. Each year the board contributes financially toward the event as well as supporting staff with their hands-on training. Donations and sponsorships from various organizations make the yearly event possible.

We wish the "Awesome Opossums" the best in their endeavors to go on to the national competition which will be held in August of 2009 in Asheville, North Carolina. Congratulations and keep studying!