

## Intriguing kids about agriculture by hands-on learning By: Corine Burgess

Ask a third grader where their food comes from and you get some interesting answers. Some children will reply, "From the grocery store," while others may say "from farms." Thanks to programs such as Ag Venture, where every third grader in Highlands County visits the fair grounds to participate in agricultural activities, kids are getting an education about their surroundings. Since agriculture is one of Highlands County's leading industries, making sure our kids know about it is important.

Every person, whether young or old, is connected to agriculture. Since we all eat food and wear clothing, we each reap the benefits of this industry. Young people need to have a good understanding of agriculture since it affects them in their every day lives. Ag Venture is a hands-on, exciting program that intrigues kids and allows them to learn while enjoying themselves. Students from public, private and even home schools all enjoy this local program.

Participating in this event is perhaps as exciting for the presenters as it is for the kids. Hundreds of volunteers come out every year to get involved in this worthy learning experience. The Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District supports Ag Venture by sponsorship. And employees from the Highlands County Parks & Natural Resources Department participate by manning the Soil and Water booth which teaches the kids about watersheds and pollution and the water cycle. Kids walk away with a good visual on the consequences of not keeping our watersheds clean and a terrarium they can take home that demonstrates the water cycle.

There are two different tracks for the youths. The classes go on one track or the other, not both. But each one features interesting agricultural presentations. One of the stations is complete with alligators where students learn about alligators in the wild and how these creatures are farmed commercially. They actually get to touch a baby alligator. Of course, where there are animals, kids are usually happy and the farm animal station is always popular. Students get to look at different types of farm animals and they learn what it takes to care for them.

And what kid wouldn't want to get out of school for the day and make a milkshake? At the strawberry station, these students are shown how strawberries are grown. They also plant a strawberry plant and make a milkshake. And speaking of plants, the caladium station shows kids how caladiums are grown and they get to plant a bulb to take home.

All of the stations are unique and include hands-on activities for the students. Other stations include beef, bees, citrus, dairy, forestry, grapes, horticulture, poultry and vegetables. There is something that is sure to peak every student's interest.

As for our staff, working the Soil and Water station is a great opportunity to teach kids about their environment and its importance. But perhaps the best part is watching them get excited about creating their own terrarium to take home. Some of the kids get so excited and ask, "We get to take this home with us?" They take a great deal of pride in making their creations and the interaction is wonderful. It is also encouraging to watch them see and understand how polluting the land is affecting our lakes and water bodies by observing the Enviroscope. As they watch the

colorful mock pollution (Jello or Kool-Aide) being sprinkled over the watershed and the rain washing it into the water, they really “get it.” The sounds of “ewww, gross,” and “I’m not swimming in that water,” make us realize they are truly getting a good understanding of just how much harm can come from a bit of litter or overuse of chemicals.

Perhaps, back in the “good old days” it wouldn’t have been necessary to have such a program to teach kids about the importance of agriculture since there were more farms then. But in today’s world, many kids aren’t exposed to the agricultural world at all. Our future generation may truly not know where butter or cheese comes from. If we want our children to take the reigns on the future, isn’t it important to teach them about where our food, clothing and shelter comes from? Ag Venture is a wonderful program, but it’s up to each one of us to continue to educate our children and grandchildren about the importance of agriculture.