

Introducing Youth to Wildlife Conservation – 4-H Wildlife Food Plot Project

Lauren B. Hood
Clemson University Cooperative Extension
120 N. Congress St.
York, SC 29745
eburdin@clemson.edu

Christopher J. Eck
Clemson University
253 McAdams Hall
Clemson, SC 29634
eck@clemson.edu

Introduction

4-H programs aim to educate youth (ages 5-18) through hands-on learning experiences (National 4-H Council, n.d.) through each state's respective Cooperative Extension Service. 4-H offers programs in areas such as agriculture & STEM, healthy living, and civic engagement (National 4-H Council, n.d.). In South Carolina, 4-H natural resources programs are offered statewide including the 4-H Wildlife Food Plot Project. This project is a hands-on environmental education program and an independent-study project that allows youth (5-18) an opportunity to establish, maintain, and observe a wildlife food plot (Clemson University Cooperative Extension, n.d.).

The 4-H Wildlife Food Plot Project aids youth in learning concepts of wildlife conservation, local plant identification, and habitat management. "Youth have a role to play in environmental and conservation efforts that will improve livelihoods" (Kawalekar & Pundalik, 2017, p. 16731). The 4-H Wildlife Food Plot Project is offered to youth with diverse backgrounds to experience and connect with nature with the help of caring adults, like 4-H volunteers and Extension Agents.

How It Works

The project once began as the food and cover establishment for wildlife project, or F.A.C.E project. It was later renamed to the 4-H Wildlife Food Plot Project. Upon registration, participants receive a monthly newsletter with information related to the project, helpful tips for success, as well as spotlight submitted photos from participants' trail cameras. Participants also receive memberships to Rack Pack provided by National Deer Association, formerly Quality Deer Management Association.

The project's seed is donated by Wannamaker Wildlife seed company in St. Matthews, South Carolina. Each participant is given a 14-pound bag of specially mixed seed that will plant approximately one eighth of an acre. Seed is distributed in September by local county extension agents that also encourage taking a soil test prior to planting. The annual planting deadline is November 1.

County extension agents, or other caring adults, visit the plots in mid to late-January to judge the size of the plot, distance to cover for wildlife, health and vigor of plants, and any other additional features added to the plot such as an exclusion cage, rain gauge, trail camera, deer stand, or observational blind. This score is then factored in with the record book score utilizing a scoring rubric.

Participants complete an age-appropriate, online record book through ZSuite. Each record book asks for details of prepping, planting, and observing the plot, as well as community/educational outreach using knowledge gained from participating in the project. Also included in the record book is a project story or video demonstration of something learned while doing the project. Older participants, junior and senior-aged 4-H members, of nine to 18 years old have a wildlife research question section to complete in addition to the above-mentioned sections. Each year, the South Carolina 4-H Natural Resources committee assigns a research question or topic for junior and senior aged participants to answer. The topics range from careers to conservation laws or

acts to invasive species. Another section of the record book is the harvest notes section, where participants can document items or experiences in the food plot (i.e., harvested an animal, found an antler shed, made an animal track cast, etc.). Every age group is to document their expenses and benefits in the financial record section. Expense examples are registration fees, soil additions, fertilizers, tools, fuel for equipment, trail cameras, etc.

Participants must complete the project survey to be eligible to win outside of the county level. Winners are selected on county, regional, and state levels. County winners receive a certificate and prize purchased by the county 4-H agent. Regional and state winners' prizes are sponsored by the National Deer Association (N.D.A.). Prizes have previously been hats, stickers, books on food plots and trail cameras, hunting items, and even trail cameras.

Results to Date and Future Plans

Since its inception, project participation continues to grow each year with an average of 100 participants annually. In 2018, further audiences were included by adding a group participation component so that agriculture or wildlife classes could participate by planting a plot at school. This group component also gave families that had five or more children the opportunity to participate with one plot total, rather than one plot per child. The average completion rate for the project is around 45-50%. The plot planting season coincides with hurricane season in South Carolina, so at least once per year there is a severe rain event that floods food plots, sometimes washing them away completely. This contributes to the completion rate, as well as the transition from paper copies of a record book to a digital version. This change was made to create a uniform design of record books so that when judging took place, books looked the same. Based on recommendations from parents and participants in surveys, there could possibly be a shift to having a virtual or paper version of the record book that will be judged separately.

Costs/Resources Needed

Participants pay an \$18 project registration fee for the 4-H Wildlife Food Plot Project, in addition to the annual \$15 4-H membership dues. Participants also purchase different items used to plow and plant their plots, as well as make amendments to the soil. It is not required but recommended a trail camera is purchased for participants to see what visits their plots.

County agents are asked to purchase a small, inexpensive prize for the county winner(s), plus print a certificate. To create a ZSuite account for creating record books, the initial cost is about \$250 incurred by the State 4-H Office. A yearly cost per record book created of less than \$1 is billed to the State 4-H Office. Once a participant has created their family profile, they do not have to do so again; they simply add a new book to their project history.

References

- Kawalekar, J. S., & Pundalik, A. A. (2017). The role of youth as conservation leaders of biodiversity. *International Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology*, 6(8), 16731–16733. <https://doi.org/10.15680/IJRSET.2017.0608317>
- National 4-H Council. (n.d.). *4-H programs at a glance*. <https://4-h.org/parents/programs-at-a-glance/>
- Clemson University Cooperative Extension. (n.d.). *South Carolina 4-H wildlife food plot project*. <https://www.Clemson.edu/extension/4h/programs/natural-resources/wildlife-food-plot/index.html>