

Expectations of Extension Agents in Mississippi 4-H Livestock and Horse Programs



The 4-H program has existed for more than 100 years in Mississippi. This youth organization helps 4-H'ers become productive and contributing members of society by developing valuable life skills, such as acting, feeling, and thinking on their own. As a result, 4-H youth learn how to accept responsibilities, communicate with others, obtain information to solve problems, make decisions, and work with others.

4-H livestock and horse projects are educational endeavors that enhance youth development as the youth accomplish the objectives of 4-H. While all 4-H projects are important, 4-H livestock and horse projects have dynamic potential for educational and personal development on many levels.

Owning and working with animals affords youth experiences that last a lifetime. Responsibility for the daily care, health, nutrition, and growth of the animal, in addition to hard work and time dedicated to training the animal for exhibition in a competitive environment, is a highly effective character-building process for 4-H youth. As Extension personnel, we must ensure that 4-H livestock and horse shows continue to be a vital part of Mississippi 4-H. Here are some ways we can do that.

- Continue to promote the Mississippi 4-H livestock and horse programs for what they are: youth development activities. While everyone is excited to place well with his or her animal at shows, it is important to emphasize to the community that the most valuable part of these shows are Mississippi youth, not the beef calf, dairy calf, pig, goat, lamb, or horse being shown. Just owning one of these animals is all that is required to be eligible to participate in 4-H livestock and horse shows. When approaching volunteers and supporters of your local shows, be sure to sell the 4-H livestock and horse program as an investment in Mississippi's greatest commodity – our youth. Volunteers and supporters are fostering development of youth into productive, contributing members of society and equipping them for success in all aspects of their adult lives.
- Emphasize the importance of family involvement in 4-H livestock and horse projects. Often youth 4-H projects can be improved if families are more involved by encouraging and showing an interest in their children. It is expected that families assist youth in their animal project(s), serve as educators of the 4-H objectives, and supervise youth as they learn the required tasks and skills in caring for their animal(s). This is when youth truly benefit in the livestock and horse projects. Youth truly benefit in the livestock and horse projects when there is family involvement.
- Provide an environment that encourages success for 4-H youth. Livestock and horse projects require long hours of hard work to get the job done. We want youth to remain involved in the 4-H livestock and horse project to continue their personal development. Therefore, it is important to provide motivation for youth to actively participate in many educational components of their project(s) that let them learn new things and progressively build on their successes. Make an effort to give youth opportunities to succeed by providing clinics to educate 4-H'ers about how to better prepare their animal(s) for show. For example, secure teaching aids and learning kits to train youth and families about their animal project. Encourage all 4-H'ers to get involved in educational contests involving livestock. Plentiful opportunities exist for youth to compete in oral presentations, judging contests, quiz bowls, cookout contests, and many others. These activities help youth bring together their experiences and knowledge about livestock and horses into another competitive arena, where they learn how to express themselves and communicate what they have learned through active participation in their project(s).
- Advocate ethical behavior and sportsmanship at shows and contests. The Mississippi Livestock Quality Assurance Program for Youth Producers should be taught to all 4-H exhibitors, parents, and volunteers. This program educates youth about the

importance of understanding their daily decisions and management strategies directly impacting their animal(s) and products from their animal(s) that enter the food chain. Participants are instructed about ten good production practices to use in their projects to assist them in properly caring for their animal(s), while ensuring production of healthy, safe products consumers can enjoy.

- Evaluate and report the participation and impact of livestock and horse projects in your county. Documenting participation in livestock and horse shows as well as educational contests is important, but strive to take your program appraisal to another level. Do the 4-H livestock and horse projects make a difference in the lives of youth in your county? Consider having older 4-H'ers discuss the impact of their animal projects and what they have gained personally at a club meeting or with a sponsor group. Develop a short survey that can be given to youth as they enter your 4-H program and have them reassess their development at intervals during their time as a 4-H'er. Finding innovative ways to document the positive impact of the 4-H livestock and horse project is vital information to magnify the importance of growing Mississippi youth and to communicate accountability with our stakeholders.

As Extension agents, we are working with the leaders of tomorrow. While successes achieved in the show ring with livestock and horse projects are important, the greatest benefit remains the development of youth into productive, self-thinking, motivated citizens. It is our responsibility and challenge now and in the future to use our leadership abilities to help make Mississippi youth better through active involvement in the 4-H livestock and horse project.

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