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Youth Hit the Road to Learn about Sustainable Livestock Production in Wisconsin

Project Title: Sustainable Beef, Sheep and Swine Production in WI-What is It? and Where Do We Find It?

Coordinator: Jessie Oberlin

Location: Jackson County, Wisconsin

SARE Grant: \$1,796

Duration: 2016-2018

To read the full project report, go to <https://projects.sare.org/search-projects/> and search for project number YENC16-102.



With support from an NCR-SARE Youth Educator grant, youth who participate in 4-H livestock projects in Jackson County, Wisconsin had an opportunity to visit five farms and businesses in southwest Wisconsin to learn more about sustainable livestock production. Photo by Jessie Oberlin.

Jessie Oberlin is no stranger to the 4-H'ers in Jackson County, Wisconsin. Whether she's providing coaching for the 4-H Livestock Judging Contest, setting up livestock production tours, or prepping youth for the 4-H Quiz Bowl, Oberlin has spent most of her adult life introducing rural young people to new livestock opportunities in a county known for cranberry and strawberry production. Oberlin grew up showing sheep with 4-H. She studied Animal Science at University of Wisconsin (UW) in River Falls, where she worked in the animal science labs after graduation. 4-H remained near and dear to Oberlin, and she eventually

became a volunteer with 4-H specializing in livestock. Fast forward 30 years, and you'll find Oberlin serving on the Jackson County Livestock Education Committee for 4-H. It was in 2016 when she heard about NCR-SARE's Youth Educator grant program at a workshop, and decided to check it out.

"This group of Jackson County livestock exhibitors that I work with have beef, sheep, or hogs as their 4-H projects," explained Oberlin. "They already had an interest in livestock, and I knew there was an opportunity to expose them to some of the innovative and interesting concepts of sustainable agriculture."

Oberlin and her dedicated team of parent volunteers started digging deeper to see what they could find near Jackson County; they tapped into their network for workshop presenters who could teach the youth about livestock and sustainability. Then they identified some livestock operations they could visit to demonstrate the topics addressed in the workshops.

Finally, Oberlin applied for an NCR-SARE SARE Youth Educator grant and received \$1,796 to fund their program that showcased sustainable livestock operations, both in the classroom and on the farm. Working with 14 youth participants ranging in age from 5th graders to juniors in high school,

the program consisted of four, 1.5 hour-long workshops held in February, March, April and May of 2017. The project culminated with a tour of five farm operations in western Wisconsin in June 2017.

Workshop presenters included Trisha Wagner, a UW Extension Agriculture Agent from Jackson County, beef cattle producer Dwight Carlisle, pastured pork producer Ryan Mickelson, and sheep producers Jill Johnson and Deanna and Duane Klindworth. In conjunction with the workshops, youth were also asked to interview two family members from different generations and ask them to define sustainable livestock production. This allowed families to explore their various definitions of “sustainable,” and they were able to apply the concepts to their personal experiences. Their two-day tour stops included Organic Prairie Meats, the UW Research Station in Lancaster, UW Platteville’s Swine Unit and Farm, Gaffney Family Cattle, and Gene Schrieffers beef and sheep operation.

“This grant allowed us to bring in knowledgeable and inspiring workshop presenters and to take kids to places that they didn’t even know existed,” said Oberlin. “We knew that this entire project was a winner when participants were asking where we were going next year before we even got home from the two-day tour.”

Oberlin was pleased that many of the participants’ families adopted more sustainable practices after the project. A family that was already rotationally grazing and out-wintering their sheep are now fine tuning their program to make smaller paddocks and get better control of weed growth.

“This family also markets their wool and produces some arts and crafts,” said Oberlin. “Since learning about ways to market using social media, they have set up a Facebook page for their farm and are having success using this marketing format.”

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