



# APPALACHIAN *Agriculture*

80 year-old West Virginia ham, bacon & egg program teaches real-world production experiences

Written by Stephanie Sindel, SC Staff

Tucked into the heart of the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia lies an agricultural program that has been around since the 1940s. Thinking back to a time that seems vastly different than now, the similarities between then and now are more strikingly aligned than we may think. Nevertheless, the one thing that holds true through the decades is the necessity of production agriculture to provide the safest, plentiful and wholesome food supply to consumers, in the world. The state of West Virginia's agricultural education programs have taken their approach to teach real-life animal sciences through FFA's Supervised Agriculture Experiences (SAEs) to the next level. One of the only states to offer such a program, they host the opportunity for students to raise hogs and chickens and then cure the hams and bacon and then have their products judged and sold through a local auction.

The program was founded by what was then referred to as the Future Farmers of America through their SAE and agricultural educational curriculum. Fast forward 80 years and the program still thrives today through FFA and modern day SAEs.

The goals of the ham, bacon & eggs program are straightforward. First and foremost, education - understanding where food comes from and how it gets to a table. Another goal is to teach students and their community about the financial responsibility of livestock and producing livestock. And lastly, for students to use this experience when considering careers through an understanding that the world needs everyone from farmers to food scientists to keep the wheels turning for agriculture.

West Virginia has 24 chapters participate in chapter Ham and Bacon programs and hosts a statewide competition held annually at the state's capitol in March. Contestants earn their chance to compete with their cured products by meeting a list of state requirements. Traveling back in time, the industry standards have progressed over the years - and so has the food science technology through scientific research and product development. The ham, bacon and eggs project encompasses live-animal evaluation, facilities, feeding and nutrition to the harvest, curing, packaging and marketing.

Mineral County FFA has provided this opportunity for countless students that have passed through the halls of their school and ag-ed program. Currently, the agricultural education program at Mineral County Technical Center (MCTC) program is led by Carol Webb, Julie Sions and Brenton Ebert, all who came up through the Ham, Bacon & Eggs program in their younger years. Each year, 30-40 students that are interested in participating in the program go to an educational meeting. Notably, all students can participate - Freshman through Seniors. Depending on whether or not the student comes from a livestock background, their experience can vary greatly. The generational gaps between producer to consumer seem to be exponentially increasing and our job to educate never ends.

Each year the students set out and put their livestock evaluation skills to the test when they pick out their projects for their SAE. Each student covers the cost of their projects. Next, comes the facility preparation. The exhibitors prepare an appropriate facility to raise the hog projects. Only the students who raise chickens are eligible to enter and sell eggs. An understanding of feeding and the merits of good nutrition are also up to each of the participating FFA members. MCTC staff said that for a vast majority of the students, this is their first time raising any species of livestock.

The projects are finished at approximately 275 pounds and are harvested at a local inspected facility. After processing, the halves are delivered to MCTC where they are hung in the lab for the completion of their carcass breakdown, cutting and curing, all in preparation for the sale. The remaining carcasses must also be cut, packaged and labeled for the students to take home.

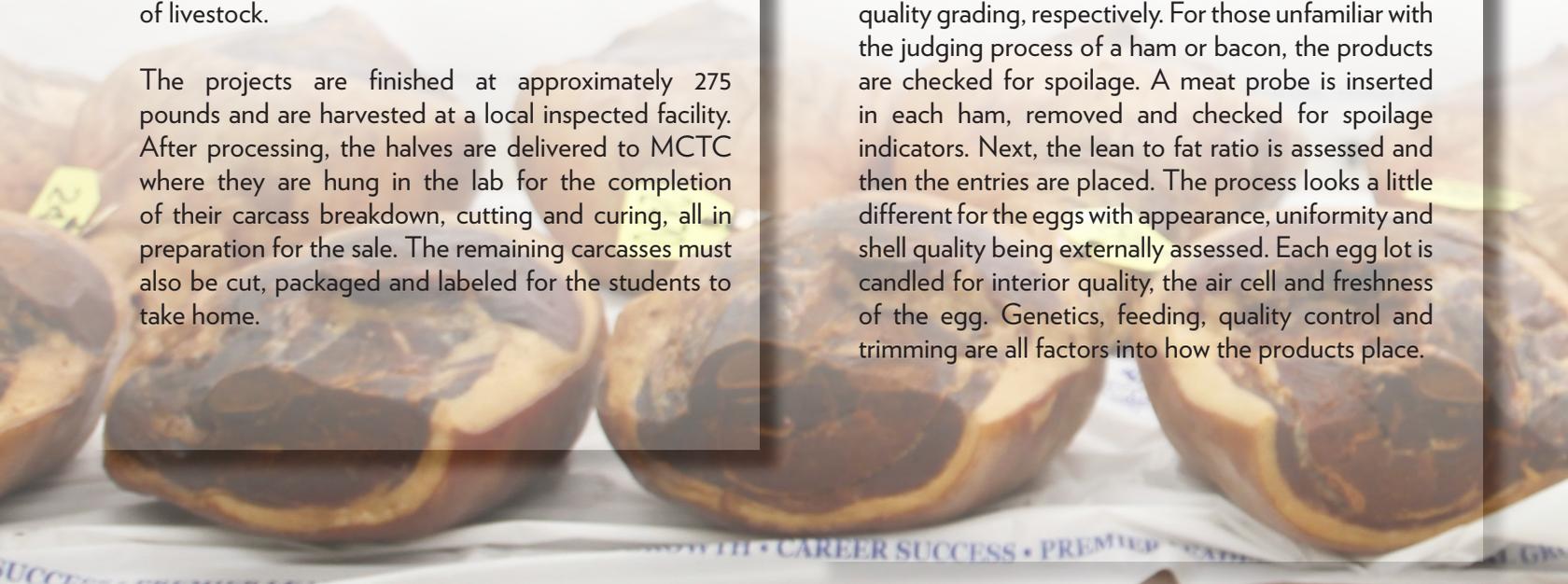


As you can imagine, the meat processing lab at MCTC is state of the art and their continuous improvements are made possible by a grant program through the state of West Virginia and the devoted individuals that submit the applications for funding. MCTC's cooler has rail space for 30 hogs. Complete with digitization, closure notifications and programming for curing and smoking. Once the carcass halves arrive, the students dive back into the 3-week process of country curing their products for the competition. A 3-phase process, country curing includes the curing stage where hams and bacon are cured at 36-40 degrees Fahrenheit for a length of 2 days per pound. Next, comes the salt equalization stage and finally the drying period. Drying is a 10 day period where the products are stored at 90 degrees Fahrenheit. During these phases, there is an 18 percent shrink on the product. Upon completion of the three processes, the product is then smoked in MCTC's commercial smokehouse for the final phase of the process.

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One of the most invaluable learning opportunities throughout the SAE is the product judging. Normally a public event including critiques by the evaluators, the Grand and Reserve champions in each division of the ham, bacon and eggs are named and assigned quality grading, respectively. For those unfamiliar with the judging process of a ham or bacon, the products are checked for spoilage. A meat probe is inserted in each ham, removed and checked for spoilage indicators. Next, the lean to fat ratio is assessed and then the entries are placed. The process looks a little different for the eggs with appearance, uniformity and shell quality being externally assessed. Each egg lot is candled for interior quality, the air cell and freshness of the egg. Genetics, feeding, quality control and trimming are all factors into how the products place.



Each student is responsible for doing their part to rally community interest in the auction. They get hands-on experience with engaging their community to promote a successful auction. Aside from first-year members, students can enter up to five lots into the sale, community support is essential to the success of the program. It is up to the students to educate buyers about the sale offering, create invitations and letters and distribute through the community - both in-person and by mail.

As you can imagine, some traditions with the ham, bacon and egg auction have changed; however, it has been a major community event since its inception. During a normal year, over 300 folks from the community would gather on an evening in March for a meal and then a live product a u c t i o n .

The auction typically grosses over \$50,000 with prize winning hams fetching north of \$55 per pound (26-30 pounds), bacons (4-12 pounds) bringing over \$1,000 and the sale price of a dozen eggs over \$500. Students pay a sale commission to help cover the cost of the auction and the remaining proceeds go back to the students. Generally the students will utilize the proceeds for college and to invest in their ham, bacon and eggs project for the next year. It is each student's responsibility to follow up with a thank you gift or note to their buyers. Buyers from the sale are family members

and local businesses. This year's auction event will take place on SC Online Sales on March 11, 2021.

As agriculturalists, the ever-present challenge of educating consumers about our methods of production agriculture seem to grow each day. Since the start of the pandemic, we hear the media talking about "food shortages", which are completely false. In fact, we have learned of supply chain gaps that will make our industry even stronger as we emerge post-pandemic. "American agriculture can and will survive. We'll do our part to invest in students who help agriculture survive, because we can't afford to lose it."

The folks of West Virginia are passionate about their ham, bacon and egg program and know the role of importance that it plays in their communities. For generations, the program has instilled animal husbandry and food safety skills into their students. Mineral County FFA is proud to offer real-world experiences to their students through the support of their community. The character and youth development that are instilled through the program are invaluable to the state of West Virginia. To hear of a program lasting nearly a century is a testament to the integrity of experience and leadership. As times have changed, the vitality of agriculture and the education of where food comes from continues to be paramount in today's society, and West Virginia is doing a tremendous job of teaching and communicating the story of agriculture. ■

