

East Washington High School's FFA Soil Judging teams walked away from the Indiana State Soil Judging competition last month with two of the top five spots - a first for Eastern's program. The high marks are an impressive looking feat on paper, but it was simply one more step in what's been a remarkable journey for these teenage soil judges this year.

Eastern began the year with 43 FFA (Future Farmers of America) members participating in Soil Judging, which translated to 11 four member teams. They kicked off their season with a bang, earning first place in both the Washington and Harrison county competitions. Eastern then went on to sweep the District contest, placing in five of the top six positions. There were nine other school participating at the district level.

"We have a great group of students this year," said Todd Elgin, Eastern High School's FFA Adviser and Soil Judging coach. He points to his teams' relentless progress as proof of their dedication to the craft of soil judging.

There are twelve school districts in Indiana and the top six teams from each district contest are eligible to compete at the state competition each year. This year, 48 soil judging teams descended on Batesville High School to compete at the 2013 State contest. Elgin and Eastern's competing teams were excited to find that one of their own placed 4th overall, and then elated to learn another placed 3rd. "Placing two teams in the top five is truly remarkable and a testament to how well the members were prepared," Elgin commented. "To give you an idea of how tough the competition is," he continued, "our 3rd place team beat our 4th place team by just 3 points."

Soil judging is not uncommon, but it is a largely unsung contest. During competition, students are tasked with examining a number of pits dug into the ground. Under a time limit, they must describe the characteristics of the dirt in each pit, properly identifying the soils by their color, texture, and other attributes. The team that comes up with the most accurate analysis earns the most points. "Basically, you evaluate soil for home sites," according to Mathie Wright, a member of Eastern's 3rd place team. Coach Elgin elaborated further that soil judging is very much akin to how contractors examine a piece of land before giving the okay to build on it.

The students would be quick to agree they've been having a charmed year at competition, but their win at Batesville is easily their biggest. Eastern has never sent a soil judging team to the nationals, so sending two teams is not only an exciting honor, its history in the making for East Washington.

The National Soil Judging contest takes place this year from April 30 through May 2 in Oklahoma City. Coming out of the State contest last month, the teams needed to raise an additional \$6000 before their trip to the finals at the end of April. As of this writing, Elgin says they are just \$700 short of their goal, thanks to the generous donations of the teams' families and FFA supporters. The only thing that could make this season better would be a final 1st place win in Oklahoma City, which for Eastern's Soil Judging teams, doesn't look that out of reach for the moment.

For more information on East Washington High School's Soil Judging teams or other FFA programs, email Todd Elgin at telgin@ewsc.k12.in.us.

