

Local student to represent Alachua County and state at national agriculture competition

Agriculture is in Cody Emerson's blood.

Six generations of both sides of his family have been raising crops and animals, and he speaks with great pride about the contributions they make toward feeding the world. But even with that history, the Santa Fe High School senior says he's learned a lot from the school's agriscience academy and his participation in the FFA program.



"Not only do you get the agricultural knowledge that this program offers, but you get the speaking and leadership skills that can be used in any career," said Emerson. "I think they've helped me develop into a better leader and a better individual in the organization and in other aspects of life."

Those skills have propelled Emerson to the National FFA Convention and Expo later this month in Indianapolis. He took top honors at the Florida FFA Convention in Employment Skills Leadership Development, and will now be competing for national recognition with other state winners from across the U.S.

Basically the state competition was like going through a very comprehensive, very grueling job interview process. He had to develop a top notch resume and cover letter. There was a phone interview. Then there were two days of rigorous in-person interviews. That process will be repeated at the national level, but then the competing students will also have to show what they can do during a networking activity, such as manning a career booth.

This will be Emerson's second shot at a national FFA title. He actually took a first place award in the competition when he was in sixth grade with a project about consumer preferences for meat.

Emerson has spent a lot of time prepping for the national competition with the help of experts from Alachua County Public Schools' Career and Technical Education Department, the University of Florida and others in the community. Meanwhile he's keeping up with a busy school schedule and running his own beef, grass and hay operations on his family's farm. He says he's fortunate to have the opportunity to be able to make most of the decisions for his operation, with the guidance of his parents.

"I've added social media marketing and other things that are a different than what a lot of 'old school' farmers do," he said. "I really want to take advantage of the cutting edge of technology."

Emerson says agriculture has to adjust to new ways of doing things if it is to keep up with demand.

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“We have to be ready to take care of the nine billion people that are going to be on our planet in the year 2050,” he said. “That may sound like a far-away time, but it’s really not, and it’s something we’re going to have to handle in our lifetime.”

Emerson says there are a lot of misperceptions about farmers and others in the agricultural industry.

“They have to be intelligent,” he said. “Everything that goes into the industry, whether it’s math, science or even the communication skills you use to sell your project, they’re all very important to the farmer or the rancher that puts the food in our grocery stores and on our plates.”

While he hasn’t finalized his plans after high school, Emerson is leaning towards a career in agricultural law. Brian Skipper, the animal science teacher at Santa Fe High, says that would be great fit for Emerson.

“People don’t realize all the policy that’s involved in agriculture and how critical it is to communicate your point and communicate it well,” said Skipper. “I would have no problem putting Cody in a room full of adults because I know he would communicate a message clearly and effectively.”

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