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Competition to put students' green smarts to the test

Students test their knowledge of the environment at annual competition

Students at Polytech High School are making their final preparations to battle at the 20th annual Delaware Envirothon April 30.

"This year I'm looking forward to finally making my mark," said Nicholas Carroll, a 17-year-old senior who grew up around wildlife.

At the Envirothon high school students test their knowledge of environmental topics such as forestry and pollution. A record-breaking 24 teams will be competing at Cannery Village in Milton.

Delaware Envirothon Chairman Rick Mickowski said it is a major event that can dictate whether a student decides to pursue a career in either environmental science or STEM (science, technology, engineering, or math) classes.

"The overall purpose is to engage high school students in working together to learn about conservation and environmental issues," Mickowski said. "When you're in high school you're still trying to find a path forward and we've had a lot of students whose Envirothon participation has sparked an interest in the environmental sciences."

When the students arrive in Milton each five-member team will have 40 minutes to answer a series of questions about a particular topic. For example a team from Caesar Rodney could be tackling forestry while the Dover High team is taking on aquatic wildlife.

The next stage is the oral presentation. Students explain the necessary steps a company would have to take to develop a 300-acre brownfield.

Students prepared for this segment by visiting the Envirothon website for pointers and reviewing what they learned in school. Susan Wujtewicz, the Polytech team advisor, said the topic won't be an easy one.

"How do they make it environmentally friendly – because you are going to displace whatever is living there," Wujtewicz said. "What are we going to do to make it both functional for humans as well as provide habitat for wildlife."

Each team member has their own reasons for taking on the Envirothon.

When it comes to the environment Marie Medina, 17, has always been a student of action. She's been a member of Future Farmers of Americas for six years, and competed last year.

"I was put into an agriscience class and I developed a passion for the environment, wanting to learn more about sustainability," she said. "There are a lot of issues with our environment and if we don't teach youth currently then our issues will never get better."

Out of the 24 teams, the top four will receive more than \$3,000 in scholarships. Cash rewards totaling \$2,200 will be distributed among the top seven teams. The competition is sponsored by the nonprofit Delaware Association of Conservation Districts.

While many of the competitors are self-motivated, Wujtewicz said getting students interested in the environmental sciences isn't easy.

"It's a challenge just getting the students motivated to wanting to do it," she said. "But once they go through a rigorous training by the time they get to the competition they actually have fun because it's outdoors."

Carroll, who didn't require too much prodding, said his dreams don't stop at the Envirothon. Eventually, he plans of studying zoology, doing wildlife documentaries and working for National Geographic.



PHOTO/ SUBMITTED PHOTO

Two high school students work together during last year's Envirothon. The annual event tests students' knowledge of environmental issues.