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Looking to the future: Rising farmers membership portends well for area agriculture

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A nationwide surge in FFA membership comes as no surprise to local agriculture experts.

In the past year, more than 17,000 new students have joined FFA, setting an all-time high in the organization's membership since founded in 1928.

During the 2010-11 school year, FFA membership grew to a record 540,379 students, up 17,070 students from 523,309 members in the 2009-10 school year. The number of FFA chapters in the U.S., Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands also grew with the creation of 106 new, chartered FFA chapters.

The trend is reflected locally.

Frederick County Public Schools currently has 808 FFA members, and eight chartered FFA organizations and plans are under way to establish a ninth chapter at Oakdale High School.

Frederick County is No. 1 in the state when it comes to ag education, said Jim Ferrant, former Frederick County Public Schools FFA supervisor.

"We have the strongest ag education program, and FFA is a key component," Ferrant said. "FFA is designed and functions as a motivational component of the ag program, and, students, like everyone else, like to be recognized for things they do."

Ferrant, who retired two years ago, said the county and state experienced increases in FFA membership over the last four years.

A revamp of the school curriculum to include animal care programs is attracting young people, but the local FFA chapters have also evolved to place an increased emphasis on leadership and career development, said Kristine H. Pearl, curriculum specialist of career and technology education and the county's FFA supervisor.

"We are seeing a broad range of students who historically would not have participated in FFA," Pearl said.

In the past few years, the school system's animal science curricular options have expanded to include pre-veterinary large and pre-veterinary small animal courses as part of our agriculture education offerings.

Students are selecting these courses and gaining exposure to agricultural education opportunities within FFA who may not have been previously aware of the benefits, Pearl said.

"There are a wide range of leadership opportunities, experiences and competitions in FFA that are geared



Photo by courtesyPhoto

The Middletown FFA team placed 3rd in the nation at the National Horticulture Identification and Judging Competition in Vegetable judging. Having won first place at state vegetable judging competition previously, they represented Maryland. Students on the team, from right, are Zoe Wolfe placing 8th individually; Lisa Michael, 10th; Alisyn Henry, 15th, and Scotty Keyser 20th. The students had to identify 25 specimens from each of the four categories; Flowers & Indoor Plants, Landscape Ornamentals, Fruits, Nuts & Berries and Vegetables. They took a general knowledge exam and judged eight classes of quality, two from each division. During their time at the conference, students also toured the San Diego Botanical Gardens, San Diego Zoo, took a cruise of the San Diego Harbor and toured the USS Midway. The students also participated in workshops relating to horticulture careers, native plants and attracting pollinators to your garden. Myrtle Sturtz coached the students and they were accompanied by Diane Ogg, Career and Technology Center environmental landscape design and management instructor.

towards a wide variety of students, not just those from a traditional agrarian background," Pearl said.

The rise in FFA membership doesn't surprise David Miller, who retired five years ago as assistant superintendent of Frederick County Public Schools, where agricultural education was his passion. He is now president of the National FFA Alumni Association.

There's been a buzz in the last few years about the importance of FFA and agricultural education, Miller said.

"Employment opportunities in agriculture across the nation have been brisk, and employers tell us they can not find enough employees trained in agriculture," Miller said. "To help in this effort, industry has stepped forward with funds to help schools start new agricultural education programs and upgrade existing ones."

A new curriculum for agriculture called CASE -- for Curriculum for Agricultural Science Education -- is being developed nationally and is being used in Maryland and many other states, Miller said.

"This is a great time to be in agriculture," Miller said.

People nationally and around the world today have an increased awareness about agriculture -- "maybe more so then any other time in my lifetime," Miller said. "I think agriculture will continue to build steam."

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