Ks Exten Summer PhaseIn

U of I Extension phasing in summer COVID-19 changes

BY KAY SHIPMAN

FarmWeek

 The University of Illinois Extension announced last week that Extension-sponsored activities, including 4-H events, would be phased in during the summer. The events will follow university and state of Illinois COVID-19 guidelines.

 Extension will not offer person-to-person activities and events through July 5. Decisions on those scheduled later will be announced on the first of the preceding month with the exception of Aug. 16-31 events, which will be announced July 15.

 Illinois 4-H Director Lisa Diaz told **FarmWeek,** “We’re not canceling our (4-H) shows. We’re working hard to transition to a new format.”

 With 4-H capstone events in the summer, much attention has been focused on the tens of thousands of 4-H’ers in 102 counties preparing to exhibit projects, animals and skills at county 4-H shows.

 All 4-H project and livestock shows scheduled through July 5 will transition online to FairEntry, a virtual software platform that Illinois 4-H used to manage project and state fair delegate information, according to Diaz. The software developer is working to add more features, such as uploading of images, videos and documentation, she said.

For more details, visit {https://4h.extension.illinois.edu/events/2020-4-h-summer-events}.

 Across the state, county Extension directors and their boards are applying the new university guidelines to different scenarios. **FarmWeek** reached out to directors who oversee 24 counties around Illinois.

**Northern counties**

 In DuPage, Kane and Kendall counties, the future of fairs in Kane and Kendall counties hasn’t been determined because both occur later in July. However, DuPage County canceled its fair, which includes the 4-H show, said Deanna Roby-Vorgias, director for the counties.

 The three counties jointly host some activities, such as public speaking and a dog show. Roby-Vorgias wasn’t sure how a virtual dog show would work, but added an industry partner coordinates the show for the counties’ 4-H’ers.

 In the three counties, other Extension programs are moving forward. For example, a Kane County Master Gardener developed a YouTube video that was shared with public libraries, and a 4-H educator developed an in-home STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) challenge by highlighting items in her backyard, while another was planning a birdwatching activity.

 “We were all kind of nervous (about virtual programming), but this is allowing Extension to grow, and it’s been great. I think this will help Extension not be so much of a secret,” Roby-Vorgias said.

**Western counties**

 Shelby Crow and her Extension boards are also encountering a split scenario with two 4-H shows scheduled in June and two in July among Adams, Brown, Hancock, Pike and Schuyler counties. The two earlier shows will offer 4-H’ers a virtual experience, Crow said.

 As for other Extension programs, such as Master Gardener, the counties “are in the process of learning how to adapt to a digital format,” Crow said.

 Crow credited the state 4-H staff for providing training and information and her own staff for its hard work. “Our staff is very adaptable, and they continue to amaze me,” she said. “If we can reach new and underserved audiences, that’s one more thing to focus on.”

**North-central counties**

 In Bureau, LaSalle, Marshall and Putnam counties, the three county fairs/4-H shows are scheduled after July 6 so additional information will be available June 1, according to Jill Guynn, Extension director. “We are operating as if in-person events scheduled for July, August and September will happen as planned,” Guynn said.

“This year will be different in some ways and will provide yet another learning opportunity for everyone,” she continued. “We are very grateful to the 4-H’ers, families, volunteers, local supporters and partners who … provide this unique program that has both direct educational and skill-building benefits to participants and their families and value to communities, counties and the state.”

**Southwestern counties**

June 4-H shows in Jackson, Perry and Randolph counties are transitioning to a digital format, according to Lynn Heins, Extension director for Franklin, Jackson, Perry, Randolph and Williamson counties.

“We are working quickly to get all the mechanisms ready for a robust virtual show experience through FairEntry,” Heins said. Because 4-H shows in Franklin and Williamson counties are planned for July, “we are holding tight until June 1 at which time a decision will be made for the format.”

Heins continued, “The feedback we’re hearing from parents is mostly concern for whether their 4-H age children will experience some level of ‘normal’ 4-H summer activity. Youth, parents and volunteers are yearning for some level of normalcy, and we’re working very hard to ensure they receive the mastery component of positive youth development through a 4-H show experience.”

Diaz acknowledged 4-H members’ “loss, disappointment and change,” but added state and county 4-H systems are offering support and working to expand online opportunities, such as a photography workshop that may be shared statewide.

“I’m hopeful this will open opportunities for those who have not been able to participate regularly in in-person events,” such as families whose work schedules or transportation availability conflict with activities, Diaz said.

 “We’re aware there are some who are negatively impacted (due to lack of access to internet and/or devices),” she said. Local Extension staff is working to “reach out to the families” by calling or “putting something in the mail. There’s a lot to be inspired about in 4-H … as we see them stepping up, serving others, making a difference - all the values of 4-H.”

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