

LOCAL NEWS

Ohio Envirothon competition brings back fond memories

By **Linda Harris** June 11, 2026 5 min read



Contributed TEAMWORK – Harrison Central students work together to answer test questions at the soil station during the 2026 Ohio Envirothon competition, held this year in Jefferson county.

STEUBENVILLE -- Wendee Zadansky-Dodds admits she gets a little nostalgic every year when Ohio's Envirothon competition heats up.

Dodds, Jefferson Soil and Water Conservation District administrator, was an Envirothon competitor herself back in her high school days. This year, she and JSWCD hosted the statewide competition, which tests the natural resources knowledge of teams of students in grades 9-12 from schools around Ohio.

"It gets me every time," she said, adding that the yearly competition teaches young people "how to be valuable members of a team, problem solve and engage in cooperative decision making."

"They gain a greater awareness of natural resources and environmental issues and are exposed to various points of view on those environmental issues, while also learning about a diversity of career opportunities," she said.

In her own case, Dodds said she had always been drawn to the outdoors. She admits she had a decidedly un-girly "fully stocked bug box" by the age of 5.

"In middle school, my family nicknamed me 'Frog Lady' because I was the kid looking at every rock, log or puddle for signs of life," she said. "I could often be spotted face down on a dock looking through the cracks between the wood boards, watching the fish underneath. Through most of my high school years, I ridiculed the idea that a boy could be more interesting than any of the things I could find outside."

But as much as she loved the outdoors, she said she "couldn't see how it could translate into something that (she) could make a living doing."

"But two things happened during my senior year of high school that helped everything fall into place," she recalled. "A high school outdoor class and teacher that strengthened my passion for conservation and the outdoors, and the Envirothon, an experience that truly opened my eyes about the diversity of not only natural resources but also career opportunities."

Dodds said she hopes the Envirothon experience impacts this year's crop of participants as much as it did her.

"Very soon (they'll) be adults working in and making decisions about the world we live in," she said. "The Envirothon might actually be the foundation for some of the next generation of conservation professionals, as it was in my own personal case, having been on Indian Creek's Envirothon team in 1995."

"But even if these (kids) aren't all headed for a career in natural resources, if they instead become accountants or surgeons or legislators, they will forever be changed by their Envirothon experience. They'll (be able to) share their knowledge of how cover crops reduce soil erosion while riding past a crop field in the backseat of a car with their parents on a rainy day, or they'll see and understand the world around them instead of just riding past it."

In Ohio, the competition began in late April with five area competitions. Hosted by the state's 88 soil and water conservation districts, as many as 250 to 300 teams -- including teams from Buckeye Local, Edison and Indian Creek -- competed at one-day events, with four teams from each area advancing to the state level.

Participating teams are tested on their knowledge of forestry, wildlife, aquatics as well as a current environmental issue, which this year was "Nonpoint Source Pollution: It Begins at Home." Nonpoint source pollution occurs when rain or melted snow flows over land, picking up pollutants that are then deposited into local waterways.

Test questions are developed by natural resource and environmental professionals from a variety of agencies, organizations, colleges, universities, park districts and businesses, who also staff the testing stations.

Organizers say Envirothon "encourages cooperative decision making, team building and problem solving," adding that students who take part "gain a greater awareness of natural resources and environmental issues." Participants also meet a wide range of professionals and are exposed to various points of view on environmental issues while learning about the diversity of natural resources and environmental career opportunities.

Winning the Ohio competition -- and the right to compete against students from throughout the United States, Canada and China in the NCF competition July 19-25 at Mississippi State University -- was the Lynchburg-Clay High School Gold team from Highland County.

Placing second were the Watkins Warriors from Watkins Memorial High School in Licking County, with the Miami Valley Career Technical Center team from Montgomery County in third.

Dodds credits a number of local groups and venues with helping make the 2026 Ohio Envirothon a success, including Franciscan University of Steubenville; Hellbender Preserve, which hosted the testing stations; Indian Creek School District, which provided buses to transport participants; and property owners Mike Ruthem, Peg Zende and their grandson Lane Corder, who helped prepare the site for the arrival of the students and hosted lunch for volunteers and test writers.

While student participants were being tested, their advisors were treated to a guided trolley tour with stops at Indian Creek High School to learn about its facilities and hellbender-rearing program from Assistant Superintendent John Belt and high school science teacher Crystal Fluharty, and the farm and home of Jules and Jodee Verhovec. The trolley ride was donated by the Steubenville Cultural Trust and driven by Dan Mayhugh.

Franciscan University professor Eric Haenni was the keynote speaker at the closing banquet.

Dodds, who chairs the Ohio Envirothon Committee, coordinated the state-level Ohio Envirothon competition. She said the JSWCD board and staff, Irene Moore, Haenni and Rob Dougherty, executive director of procurement and auxiliary services, and his team were instrumental in bringing the competition to the county, the second time JSWCD has hosted the event.