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Students compete in regional Envirothon

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By: [Anne Williams](#), Bemidji Pioneer

Wednesday's beautiful weather made it seem like Mother Earth was celebrating Earth Day a day early as high school teams from the region competed in the 2010 Envirothon held at Lake Bemidji State Park.

The Envirothon, an outdoor learning event for students in grades 9-12, is one of the state's largest environmental education competitions. Teams from Park Rapids, Grand Rapids, Walker-Hackensack-Akeley, Lake of the Woods, Menahga and Bemidji attended.

TrekNorth High School, the only school from Beltrami County and Bemidji to participate this year, took home second place in its first appearance.

Lake of the Woods High School took first place and Park Rapids took third.

There are eight regional Envirothon competitions held throughout the state and organized by the state's Soil and Water Conservation Districts. The top three teams from each region attend the state competition.

This year's Envirothon theme was groundwater protection.

Natural resources professionals from the region were presenters at each of the stations. They used the outdoor setting and their own props to add to the experience.

Student teams visited five stations – soils, aquatics, wildlife, forestry and current events – and answered a 20-point exam at each station. Students were given about 30 minutes at each station to complete each exam.

Teams also gave a brief oral presentations on the protection of groundwater through urban, agricultural and environmental planning. Teams were given scenarios in which they were to give a set of alternative solutions to a nitrate pollution problem in a town.

At the end of the day, the team with the highest score wins.

TrekNorth environmental science teacher Jennifer Roy said after visiting the Envirothon as a spectator last year, she wanted students to compete this year.

"I thought to myself, 'We have kids who could do this,'" Roy said.

Junior High science teacher Lydia Pietruszewski asked to help with the competition, as she had once gone to the state Envirothon as a student at Bagley High School.

"I think we were helpful in getting them prepared," Pietruszewski said. "The oral presentation made them nervous, but we told them just to prepare for it as much as they could and not to worry."

Roy said it was hard to help students prepare for the competition because she wasn't exactly sure what it would be like.

"I'm really impressed with how hard they worked," Roy said.

Last year's first place winners, Lake of the Woods High School from Baudette, Minn., took first place again this year.

LOW science teacher Lisa Brien said her students met once a week to prepare for the Envirothon. She said because LOW doesn't offer an ecology class, she organized a variety of hands-on activities relating to ecology.

"I brought in professionals with the local SWCD and Department of Natural Resources to talk to the students," Brien said. "We also did activities like tree identification in the school forest, identifying waterfowl and animal pelts, and learning how to age deer teeth."

Because the event is a competition, there are rules that must be followed by participants.

Team members cannot carry notes, tape or video recorders, books, cell phones, IPODs or other electronic devices with them during the competition, except standard calculators. Teachers can not accompany their teams during and after the exam rounds. Teachers can watch their own team during oral presentations, but cannot provide feedback or interact with them in any way before, during, or immediately after the presentation.

"I hope (students) take away the knowledge of how to take care of our natural resources," said Corryn Trask, a resources specialist with the SWCD out of Lake of the Woods. "There aren't a lot of events like this one."

As for the good weather, Trask said it's been great every year the competition has been held at the state park in Bemidji.

John Fylpaa, naturalist at Lake Bemidji State Park, was in charge of the aquatics exam, which he said was fitting for the state park.

"The aquatics section is a significant program because the state park sits on Lake Bemidji," Fylpaa said. "We have the lake, a bog and a creek coming in. It's very water-based here."

The Envirothon program stated in 1979 in Pennsylvania. Minnesota held its first Envirothon in 1993 with 100 students from the Twin Cities area participating. The following year, several Soil and Water Conservation Districts organized area competitions. By 1996, area competitions were held across the state.

Blane Klemek, Bemidji area assistant wildlife manager with the DNR Division of Fish & Wildlife, said he was pleased to see a school from Bemidji compete.

"It's right in their backyard," Klemek said.

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