

NAE4-HYDP Award Submission: Excellence in Workforce Development Programming

Abstract

Work Ready Florida 4-H

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Work Ready Florida 4-H addresses critical workforce shortages in Florida's agriculture industry by equipping youth with industry-recognized certifications, hands-on career training, and direct career exposure. Through bimonthly club meetings, industry-led workshops, and real-world experiences such as aquaponics field trips, participants develop leadership and professional competencies. Since launching, the program has doubled enrollment (73 to 175) and achieved a 30% increase in AEST certification completions, with 80% of youth more confident in agricultural career pathways. Partnerships with universities, Florida Farm Bureau, and industry ensure sustainability and access for underrepresented communities. Graduates have secured positions in agribusiness, veterinary clinics, and food production, while others pursue advanced degrees at institutions such as Cornell University. By uniting education, industry, and 4-H, Work Ready Florida fosters a skilled, diverse agricultural workforce to meet the state's evolving needs.

Award Submission: Excellence in Workforce Development

Introduction

The Work Ready Florida 4-H Program addresses critical workforce shortages in Florida's agriculture industry by equipping youth with industry-recognized certifications, hands-on career training, and direct career exposure. With a nationwide shortage of 200,000 STEM-related workers (McKinsey Report, 2011) and half of high school students unprepared for careers (National 4-H Council, 2021), this program meets an urgent need.

Florida's agriculture sector, particularly in precision agriculture, agribusiness, sustainable farming, and food safety, requires a skilled workforce. Supported by USDA/NIFA FANE, Work Ready Florida 4-H aligns with the state's economic and agricultural workforce priorities, ensuring youth are prepared to succeed in industries such as citrus production, aquaculture, livestock management, and agritechnology.

Program Goals & Objectives

1. Prepare youth for industry-recognized certifications (AEST Agriculture Systems Certification, Agritechnology, Unmanned Aircraft Systems, and Agricultural Communications).
2. Expose participants to real-world agricultural careers through electronic field trips, industry mentorships, and workforce training.
3. Develop career competencies in leadership, communication, and professional skills.
4. Expand the program statewide, reaching 300 youth annually by 2026 and growing into three new Florida counties per year.
5. Ensure 90% of participants can identify five careers in agriculture and understand the skills and certifications needed.

Program Description

Work Ready Florida 4-H integrates hands-on training, cutting-edge technology, and direct industry partnerships to prepare youth for agricultural careers through several delivery methods:

1. Hands-on Training & Certification

- Bimonthly club meetings, led by university faculty and a teen advisory board, focus on industry trends, technical skills, and workforce readiness.
- Participants receive garden kits, project books, and record books, applying agriscience principles in real-world scenarios.
- Certification-focused training ensures youth pass industry-recognized exams (60% certification pass rate goal).

2. Industry Exposure & Career Exploration

- Electronic Field Trips: Live interactive broadcasts connect youth with UF researchers and industry leaders on peanut maturity testing, aquaponics, and disease detection in strawberries.
- On-Campus Events: Participants have toured UF's Dairy Research Unit, made mozzarella cheese, and explored soil science, livestock health, and agricultural machinery.
- Ag Career Tour of Hillsborough County: Youth visited Florida's aquaculture, tomato, and dairy industries and received job coaching from Saputo's HR team.

3. Leadership & Curriculum Development

- A replicable curriculum is being developed for statewide 4-H clubs, school classrooms, and off-season workforce development programs at 4-H Camp Cherry Lake (Completion: Summer 2025).
- Curriculum is developed by Agricultural Education and Communication (AEC) graduate students to align with industry needs.

4. Sustainability & Partnerships

- A Teen Leadership Board collaborates with UF and FAMU faculty to assess and improve program effectiveness.
- Strategic partnerships with UF, FAMU, and Florida Farm Bureau expand access to minority youth in agriculture.
- Work Ready Florida 4-H was showcased at the Florida Farm Bureau annual meeting, where youth networked with industry leaders and presented their workforce development efforts.

Program Impact

Work Ready Florida 4-H measures success through pre- and post-program assessments, field trip surveys, certification tracking, and qualitative evaluations. Last year 170 Florida teens have participated, with a 30% increase in AEST certification completions over the previous year.

Key Impact Highlights

Certification & Workforce Readiness

- 100% of participants can list five careers in agriculture and describe the qualifications needed.
- 80% report increased confidence in agricultural career pathways (up from 50% in previous years).
- Program participation doubled, from 73 in year one to 170 youth currently enrolled.

Transforming Youth Career Trajectories

- A participant who knew nothing about agriculture before Work Ready Florida 4-H is now pursuing environmental science and horticulture at Cornell University, after earning two AEST certifications.
- A participant who earned the AEST Animal Science Certification now works at a veterinary clinic earning above her peers and funding her college education.
- A participant credited Work Ready Florida 4-H's resume and interview training for securing a restaurant manager position immediately after high school.

Expanding 4-H's Reach to Underserved Communities

- In urban Palm Beach county, a young person who joined virtually, later became her county's 4-H Council President, ran for state office, and is now pursuing agricultural law.
- A partnership with FAMU, an HBCU, has expanded access for underrepresented youth in agriculture.
- Participants completed the Draw-a-Scientist Test (Chambers, 1983), where 50% of agricultural scientist drawings depicted women, showing a shift in youth perceptions.
- A focus group revealed that youth now see people "who look like them" in agricultural science careers, proving the program's success in breaking barriers.

Collaboration & Renewability

The long-term sustainability of Work Ready Florida 4-H is driven by strong partnerships, structured leadership, and continuous improvement.

- UF and FAMU faculty refine and expand the curriculum.
- Florida Farm Bureau provides mentorship opportunities and career networking.
- Industry partners (Saputo Dairy, AEST) provide job coaching, certification support, and workforce placement opportunities.
- UF Extension Specialists deliver the program statewide, ensuring youth engagement in every region.
- Spanish River High School and Everglades Prep Academy have integrated Work Ready Florida into their career education programs, broadening impact.

Conclusion

By equipping youth with real-world skills, industry-recognized certifications, and career exposure, Work Ready Florida 4-H is transforming agricultural education and preparing the next generation of leaders. This scalable, replicable, and sustainable model ensures continued impact in Florida and beyond.

Work Ready Florida a new 4-H Opportunity to Help Prepare Florida Teenagers for Careers in Agriculture



Agriculture is Florida's second-largest industry. New technologies have opened the door to a new world of opportunities for careers in Florida agriculture.

Work Ready Florida is a new opportunity that will introduce teenagers to basic agricultural concepts. Additionally, this program will help students develop the technical skills needed for careers in agriculture. Any teenager may join this 4-H club.

Work Ready Florida will prepare participants to test for Florida Farm Bureau's AEST (Agricultural Education Services and Technology) certifications. These certifications can help prepare youth for careers in Florida agriculture industry.

In addition, participants will take part in hands-on training around the state. Participants will also attend on-campus experiences at the University of Florida, Florida A&M University and other facilities. There will also be opportunities to explore agriculture and ag-related careers through virtual field trips to Florida agricultural enterprises.

Work Ready Florida is a partnership between the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension, Florida A & M University (FAMU) Extension, and USDA's National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), in cooperation with the Florida Farm Bureau.

The first meeting of Work Ready Florida will be held in-person at Florida 4-H University in July, followed by virtual meetings held monthly. Then, regular 4-H club meetings will begin in August.

For more information, contact Dr. Christopher Decubellis at cdecube@ufl.edu. Also, visit www.florida4h.org for more information on Florida 4-H. Visit aest.ag for more information on certifications.

Financial assistance and accommodations are available to help with participation, travel and expenses.

Author Profile

cdecube



A multi-generation native of Pasco County, Chris grew up on a family farm. Chris attended the

University of Florida, where he majored in Animal Science. Chris also earned a Master's degree and a PhD in Agricultural Education and Communication. ...

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Work Ready Florida uses a diverse approach to learning complementing virtual club meetings with in-person experiential experiences.



Work Ready Florida 4-H Ambassadors have educated the public on agriculture and their program at many fairs and conventions including the Florida Farm Bureau State Convention and the Florida Legislature.





Streaming Science · Follow

April 19, 2024 · 🌐

We had a great time live streaming our Scientist Online: Insect Investigators electronic field trip from the [Florida A&M University](#) campus in Quincy last week to 4-H [Florida 4-H Youth Development Program](#)!

Watch the recording on our website: <https://streamingscience.com/scient.../insect-investigators/>

Learn more about the Work Ready FL program: <https://florida4h.ifas.ufl.edu/.../work-ready-florida/>

Funded by: [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) #NIFAImpacts
#scicomm #biologicalcontrol #pestmanagement

Work Ready Florida is a proud partner of the University of Florida's Streaming Science program. Participants benefit from having access to agricultural education regardless of geographic barriers, as well as the opportunity to connect with University of Florida and Florida A & M University faculty.

streamingscience.com



Streaming Science: Streaming Strawberries

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Q&A

All questions (16)

old this is my first year in the work ready 4h club and I have been in 4h for 8 years

L. Hello Kami, thank you for sharing, and for tuning in!

Show answer

Hanna Kim 05:02 PM

Hello! Thank you for putting this together!

L. Thank you for tuning in!

Show answer

★ Streaming... moderator 05:03 PM

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Feed the Future with a Career in the New World of Agriculture

Agriculture is Florida's second-largest business. New technologies, a growing market for food and alternative crops have opened the door to a new world of opportunities for careers in agriscience and agribusiness.

- **Learn new AI technologies**
- **Get hands-on experience**
- **Get certified for Agricultural Education Services and Technology (AEST)**
- **Explore agriculture and ag-related careers through virtual tours of Florida businesses**

Work Ready Florida is a new 4-H Club program. Meet in-person at Florida 4-H University in July, followed by virtual meetings held monthly.



For more information, contact

Christopher DeCubellis at cdecube@ufl.edu.

<https://florida4h.ifas.ufl.edu/youth/4-h-clubs/virtual-clubs/work-ready-florida/>

Financial assistance is available to help with travel and expenses.