

Setting up and holding a Land Evaluation Contest

Jan. 6, 2026

Contest Fees

\$3/per contestant (approved 12.28.22). If adults are competing they should also include \$3 with the registration. Registration fees are collected from schools and provided to Joel Miller, State Land Judging Coordinator. Fees are used to pay for ScanTron cards, ribbons, plaques, banners, and national-qualifier team stipends.

Plan

The State Land Judging Committee traditionally meets the first of the year to set dates for October competitions. The NRD host will determine the date and approximate location for the regional and state contests. The coordinator should contact and make arrangements with the support agencies: University of Nebraska, Natural Resources Districts, Natural Resource Conservation Service and others. The earlier these agencies are contacted, the easier it is for them to make arrangements for staffing, contest site preparation (field and meeting area), and procuring adequate contest materials. Contests are best if scheduled during the middle of the week usually Wednesdays in October. This allows the pits to be dug on Monday for a Tuesday contest or the pits to be filled on Friday after a Thursday contest. The pits should not remain open any longer than necessary.

Agencies

The State Land Judging Committee is made up of Vocational Agriculture Instructors (a representative from each LJ Region), NRD Land Judging Hosts and NRCS Soil Scientists. The Committee meets at least one time annually in late December/Early January.

The following are historically what has been done:

- Vocational agriculture instructors
 - Organizing/Notifying Area Schools
 - Training Students
- Natural Resources Districts (NRD)
 - Coordinating contest dates
 - Registering and preparing contestants
 - Host the contest
 - Organize:
 - Staff the contest/recruit volunteers
 - Registration
 - Scoring
 - Distributing Ribbons and Plaques
 - Field site preparation: selecting and digging pits
- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
 - Assistance in staffing for the contest
 - Official judge for the soil pits and fields for the contest.
 - They need to know at least 30-90 days before the contest to plan their schedules.
 - **NRCS used to help select and dig sites, but as of 2025 they have to follow “Cultural Resource Review” when digging which cause delays up to 6 month. Best for NRDs to select the site and dig themselves.

- Other organizations and agencies may provide staffing assistance or other services that might be needed. See “Recruiting Land Judging Volunteers” section.

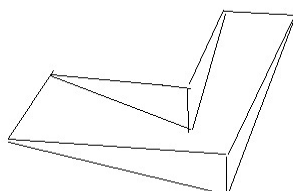
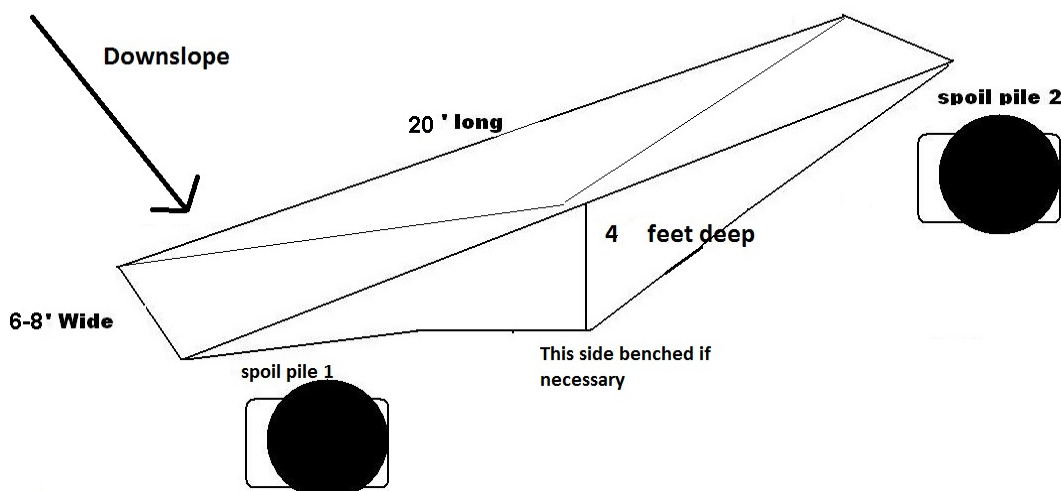
Field site

Field site selection and securing permission for the contest and pits is usually coordinated by the local NRCS soil scientist and conservationist; however as of 2025 the NRD host will select and dig the pits. The site should have reasonable access for vehicles, usually school busses or vans and a safe area for parking and assembling the contestants prior to and at the conclusion of the field judging.

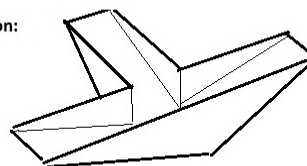
Select four sites within a reasonable walking distance. It is preferable that the sites be about the same walking time between them.

A pit should be dug at each site to show the soil profile and allow contestants to observe the natural soil in place. Modification of the soil profile is discouraged. The profile should be lighted by the sun during the late morning. The pits should be large enough for several contestants to enter at any one time, not deeper than 4 feet. At least one end of the pit should be stepped out or shaped to provide easy access (preferably two sides). The side of the pit opposite the soil profile should be sloped to a stable grade to prevent trapping contestants should the pit collapse.

Per Osha Manual: *The excavation standards do not require a protective system when an excavation is made entirely in stable rock or when an excavation is less than 5 feet (1.52 meters) deep and a competent person has examined the ground and found no indication of a potential cave-in.*



Alternative orientation:



Example soil pit for Land Judging Contest.

By Patrick Cowser, R.S.S.

Soils for the contest should be chosen so they fit into one of the soil classifications given in the official Capability Chart for the area of the contest.

The following is handled by the NRCS Soil Scientist:

- An 'official profile' area about one-foot wide is prepared on the profile face of the pit and marked with flags at the surface, a string may be added along the sides of the area.
- Contestants are not allowed to disturb this area and must make their observations on either side of the reserve area.
- A sample of adequate size is obtained from the surface layer and placed in a container labeled 'Surface layer'. Another sample is obtained from the subsoil or most restrictive layer for permeability determination and is placed in a container labeled 'Control section'. These samples are used by the contestants for determining surface texture, subsoil/control section texture and permeability.
- Official determinations should be made from these samples.
- Water should be provided for moistening the samples for texture determination. If the soil profile is dry a spray bottle of water may be provided for misting the soil profile.
- Soil spatulas/trowels should be provided at each field site so contestants may use them to examine the soil profile outside of the designated profile face.

The official field site is marked by flags and should be at least 100 feet square. This field is not considered to have any conservation practices, such as terraces installed. Any pre-existing practices are ignored in prescribing proper practices. The only existing features used in judging are gullies, weeds, trees and brush which may be present on the site.

Slope stakes are established within reasonable proximity to the official field. These stakes should be driven to the same height and should be placed with the normal slope of the land. Runoff should be expected to flow generally from the upper to the lower stake. The slope stakes should be placed 100 feet apart or can be placed 50 feet apart with instructions to the contestants that 50 feet is used at this site.

An official key should be completed and submitted to the hosting NRD the day before the contest if possible, so scoring keys can be completed in advance. Assign the point values to the various answers relative to its importance.

Official Field Instruction cards should be prepared for each site and include the site number, thickness of the original topsoil, water table depths, flooding and ponding information, soil test data, deposition soil factors, and any other factors. If the pit is not 4' deep that should be indicated on the Field Instruction Card. Suggested cards are available on the website.

General contest rules

1. No talking or comparing cards.
2. No bubble vials, tape measures or other measuring devices are allowed.
3. Contestants can have the following pieces of equipment:
 - Pencil – Required for Scantron Cards; No Pens
 - Reference Card (colored paper)
 - Official Scantron Contest Card
 - Capability Chart
 - Clipboard – As of 2026, all clipboards should be clear. If students bring a different kind of clipboard, they cannot use it and must go without a clipboard.
 - Hand towel for cleaning soil off hands.

Knives are NOT allowed at contests

*Cell Phones are NOT allowed at contests***

**Contestants are not allowed to have a phone during the contest. The contest staff should have zero tolerance for such devices. If contest staff see a phone they should pull the card at the judging site. Students will not be allowed to continue judging while the phone is still with them. Students need to find a teacher to leave their phone with until the end of the contest if they wish to continue. If contest staff see a phone while students travel between sites, they should pull the card for the upcoming site. This rule also includes Apple watches or any device that may be used to communicate. If advisors have students that have a watch that may be confused with an Apple watch or similar device, please suggest that they leave it on the bus or van with their phone. Many students may use a standard watch to help monitor time. **

4. The land evaluation handbook and the most current capability chart for the area will be used to resolve contest differences and should be used in setting up and conducting the contests. The latest information will be available on the official Land Evaluation website, it is the obligation of the instructors, site judges and others to make sure they are using the most current information. Changes will not be made to the 'official' site within 30 days of the first contest for a given year.
5. Contestants are only allowed to take notes on site instructions (ie, soil depth, erosion and slope). Other written information on reference cards and capability charts are not allowed.
6. NRD Host will need to find a way to sort students into 4 (or more) groups to rotate through the soil pits. Some ideas include counting off students (1, 2, 3, 4 or A, B, C, D); printing reference cards in 4 colors and splitting the pits by reference card color; putting colored dots, Numbers (1-4) or Letter (A-D) on reference cards. NRD Host can decide how to split at the time of the contest.

Conducting the Contest

- **Advance Registration** – Schools should register in advance so you can prepare enough cards for their schools. Contest fees are \$3/per contestant. If adults are competing they should also include \$3 with the registration. On the registration form, ask for the School's National FFA ID Number. This will be used at the Team # on the LJ ScanTron for.
- Prepare cards ahead of time by having reference card, ScanTron card and capability charts separated and placed in a large envelope labeled for each school. Contestants will receive a reference card, scantron card and capability chart after arriving at the judging site.
 - When preparing cards, you may want to decide how you're going to split the students among the 4 pits for rotation. Teachers request that NRDs split them up - some ideas include counting off students (1, 2, 3, 4 or A, B, C, D); printing reference cards in 4 colors and splitting the pits by reference card color; putting colored dots, Numbers (1-4) or Letter (A-D) on reference cards.
- After receiving contest materials and instructions from site judge, the contestants and adults will be divided into 4 (or more) rotational groups. Contestants with the letter A or #1 will go to site 1, B or #2 to site 2, C or #3 to site 3 and D or #4 to site 4. The Adult and previous winners group will wait in the 5th rotational group and move to site 1 when it is rotation time.
- Allow groups 20 minutes to evaluate each site. Before judging a site, contestants will be given field note information from the field instructor.
- Use a signal, such as a car horn from a central location that can be heard at all sites for timing. This notifies the group leader to move the students to the next site when the 20-minute evaluation period is finished.
- As contestants finish or when time is expired, ask them to flip over their Reference Card to the field notes and place over their Scantron Card. This will help prevent cheating and they'll also be ready to take notes at the next pit.
- **LAST PIT – ENDING CONTEST**
 - At the end of contest, give students time to ensure all bubbles on their official ScanTron card are properly filled in.
 - A volunteer should be designated to collect all the cards and return them to the central point for scoring.
 - After score cards are turned in, students should walk around the pit and clean up – pick-up trash, pencils, etc.
 - After Soil Scientists go over the results with students/teachers, the pits will remain open for approximately 30-45 minutes for teachers and students to evaluate for learning. After this time, teachers can take soil samples from the boxes of soil textures at the pit.

During the State Contest, site buckets with representative samples of soil textures in the contest area should be provided for contestants to examine before the contest in the registration area.

Scoring and Grading

Categories on the scorecard carry varying values depending on the judges' evaluation of its relative importance. The total possible points on each site is 100, with 50 in part 1 and 10 in part 2 and 40 for part 3. Each ScanTron bubble must legibly marked with a pencil to get credit for the answer. Only one answer per item will be counted, if multiple blocks are marked in part 1 or part 2, no credit will be given (erasures and changed answers are OK).

The points will be assigned to each correct answer by the Soil Scientist who scores the official score cards for the contest. They will use their judgment to assign values to each answer according to how important they feel the determination is to evaluate the site.

DIRECTIONS FOR USING THE SCANTRON MACHINE

Method of breaking ties needs to be announced before starting the contest. This is how ties have been handled in some past contests, but alternative methods may be used:

- Choose a soil pit/field site as the tie breaker. Example: The student that scored highest on site #3 wins the tie. If a tie still exists then use scores from site #4, #2.
- If there is still a tie, use scores from Part 1 then Part 2 on the card. If still tied, names are drawn from a hat for the winner.

RESULTS

The NRD host should email their regional contest results to Joel Miller, State Land Judging Coordinator, and Megan Grimes, NARD. Megan will post the results on the Land Judging section of the NARD website. Please also email a PDF of the results to the Teachers/Schools that competed at your contest. Joel Miller will later confirm with teachers on what schools qualified for State Land Judging.

Awards (Area Contests)

If distributing ribbons/plaques that day, have a table available to put the plaques and ribbons on for the awards ceremony. During the awards presentation, have someone assigned to record if ribbons or plaques were not picked up by a school in case they had to leave early to go back to school. This helps in mailing the awards later.

INDIVIDUAL RIBBONS – *You can print a report from judgingcard.com that shows ribbon placements.* Individual ribbons are given to contestants in descending order of scores (Purple, Blue, Red, and White) according to the number of ribbons based on the previous years' participation. When scores are announced, go in ascending order starting with your lowest scores first moving to the highest scores.

Example ONLY (number of ribbons given determined by number of contestants/ribbons sent to region)
1-10 places: Purple Ribbons
11-20 places: Blue Ribbons
21-30 places: Red Ribbons
31-40 places: White Ribbons

TEAM PLAQUES

Plaques are presented to the top-scoring teams that qualify for the State Contest, which is based on the number of participating schools in the area contest. Only one team per school is eligible to qualify for state.

State Qualifying Numbers:

- Less than 3 schools in area contest – 1 team qualifies
- 3-4 schools in area contest – 2 teams qualify
- 5-9 schools in area contest – 3 teams qualify
- 10-14 schools in area contest – 4 teams qualify
- 15-19 schools in area contest – 5 teams qualify
- 20-24 schools in area contest – 6 teams qualify
- 25-29 schools in area contest – 7 teams qualify
- 30+ schools in area contest – 8 teams qualify

Students that place in the top 10 of an Area Contest but are not on a state-qualifying team may qualify to compete as an individual at the State Contest. These students will be awarded individual ribbons, but their score will not count on any team scores.

Example:

1st place: John Legend, Lincoln High

2nd place: Norman Bates, Hampton

3rd place: Nick Jonas, Hampton

4th place: Justin Bieber, Minden

5th place: Stevie Nicks, Hampton

6th place: Taylor Swift, Pawnee

7th place: Neil Diamond, Hampton

8th place: Elton John, Axtell

9th place: Paul McCartney, Raymond Central

10th place: Pat Benatar, Hampton

Hampton's state-qualifying team would be: Norman Bates, Nick Jonas, Stevie Nicks and Neil Diamond (top 4 scorers). However, Pat Benatar from Hampton would also get to compete at the State Contest (as an individual not on the team) because she scored in the top 10.

John Legend from Lincoln High would also qualify to compete as an individual at the State Contest. He scored first, but the rest of his classmates did poorly, so there are not enough students to make a Lincoln High team.

Instructors must notify the State chairman by the Friday following the final scheduled Area Contest in order to compete, so the State Contest scoring sheet and scorecards can be completed.

Contest Staffing

The following is a list of staff people needed to carry out a contest. Numbers of '*' staff may need to be increased if more contestants are present. Agricultural Educators/Teachers may be requested to assist at area contests as Group Leaders.

Field Location

Site judge* – one at each of the 4 sites, give field instructions, monitors the contestants, collects scorecards

Timer – one, centrally located to sites, preferably in a position to see when contestants have reached each site, signals start of judging and end of judging time. Twenty (20) minutes is allowed for judging. Travel time between sites will vary and judging should not be started until all contestants reach their next site.

Group leader – 4, one for each group (A, B, C, & D), leads the groups from one site to the next.

Card carrier – On the last pit, a volunteer is needed to collect the ScanTron cards from students and take them to the scoring room. You might have the group leader collect the cards and return them to a central site.

Field foreman (Typically Soil Scientist) – gives preliminary instructions when students arrive at the field site, may announce answers at the end of the contest.

Clean-up* – pick up signs, water containers, dispose of soil samples/boxes, pick up area. Make sure the pits are filled in properly and if needed reseeded (usually the Soil Scientist along with designated volunteers).

Scoring Location

Registration* -- 2-4 people to check-in schools, hand out registration packets, make changes, etc.

Scantron Scoring – 1-2 people scanning all the cards through ScanTron machine. The machine will score and sort results, with reports that can be downloaded or printed from judgingcard.com

Equipment Needs

- ScanTron Machine – Each Land Judging Region Has One. If not in your possession, ask the last NRD that hosted in your region for it.
- Stable internet connection is needed for the ScanTron Machine to work.
- Official Score Sheet – Soil Scientist will need to fill out an "official score card" that will be used as the key for the ScanTron scoring.

Other items

Plan for refreshments for the contest staffing people.

Materials needed for field site preparation (Coordinate these items with Soil Scientists)

1. 16 flags to mark corners of the field to judge
2. 8 lathe for slope stakes
3. 8 flags for marking official profile
4. 4 stakes with large numbers (1-4) to mark the field numbers
5. 4 signs for group leaders (A, B, C, D)
6. 8 small boxes (white trash bags) for soil samples (Surface layer and control section)
7. 4 water bottles for wetting samples
8. Provide picks or soil Spatulas/trowels to be used by contestants to pick soil for profile in the pit at each field site.
9. 1 official score card (all four pits on same ScanTron Card)
10. 4 official field instruction cards
11. Port-A-Potties – If you're able to provide a restroom(s), this is great.
12. At the State Contest registration site – A set of buckets with representative samples of soil textures for that contest area for contestants to examine before the contest

Recruiting Land Judging Volunteers

Traditionally, NRD staff and NRCS employees handle volunteer tasks at the field sites. Additional volunteers are often needed for check-in, serving food, etc. Below is a list of places to start finding volunteers:

Nebraska Extension – Call your county extension agents; sometimes there is a 4-H Club that may be willing to serve food as a fundraiser.

- Natural Resources Districts – NRD staff in the region that aren't hosting that year
- NRD Board Members
- Nebraska Association of Resources District (NARD) – Staff members may be able to help
- Nebraska Extension
- Lions Club/Kiwanis Groups
- Environmental Clubs (Keep Nebraska Beautiful, Master Gardeners, etc.)
- Environmental Non-Profits
- Senior Citizen Groups
- Local Colleges – Student Volunteers
- Corn Growers Association – Local Chapter Volunteers (if not harvesting)
- Nebraska Farm Bureau – County Chapter Members (if not harvesting)
- Nebraska Cattlemen/Beef Council – Chapter Members
- Agronomist Companies in the Area
- Parent-Teacher Organizations/Associations (PTO or PTA)

Suggested Instructions to Contestants – At Start of Contest

1. Check your contest cards – make sure you have:
 - 1 Reference Card – contestants will keep this after the contest for their records.
 - 1 Official Scantron Card – Must bubble name/answers correctly to be scored.
 - 1 Capability Chart
 - Pencil – MUST HAVE PENCIL – NO PENS! ScanTron will not read pen.
 2. Contestants can have the following pieces of equipment:
 - Pencil – NO PENS
 - Reference Card
 - ScanTron Card
 - Capability Chart
 - Clipboard: Clear clipboard with no markings or rulers
- **No phones, smart watches or other communication devices.****
3. Soil Scientist or an official should state their intentions and thoughts on when they would use Treatment #23 (Defer Grazing) OR Treatment #24 (Continue Grazing)
 4. You will have **20 minutes** to judge each site.
 5. Results may be given the day of the contest or emailed the next day. Email to Joel Miller, Megan Grimes and participating schools. Send a PDF to schools.
 6. No talking between contestants. Cards may be taken up if this rule is violated.
 7. Contestants are only allowed to take notes on site instructions (soil depth, erosion and slope). Other written information on the reference card, ScanTron card and capability chart are not allowed.
 8. Students will divide into groups. Please move with your group leader.

Additional Tips for Land Judging Hosts

1. If you have an area or state sponsor, provide an area for exhibits/recognition and invite them to the contest for recognition.
2. Prepare a written agenda/program to help with last minute announcements or recognition.
3. Have an area or wall for banners for teams/students to take pictures (State Contestant)
4. For announcements/field instructions it is best to have a portable sound system or possibly a bull horn so everyone can hear. Sometimes this is difficult outside in windy weather.
5. If there is wet weather, have a supply of 2-gallon freezer bags to keep score cards dry. ScanTron Cards are on Rite in Rain paper, but mud should be wiped off as the machine can't read muddy cards.
6. If possible, recognize the landowner at a fall/winter NRD meeting and take photos for publication. Make them feel special!

AFTER THE CONTEST – ScanTron Machine & Score Card Inventory

Storing/Transporting ScanTron Machine

- Dust/wipe down off the ScanTron machine – can of compressed air good for this.
- Remove ink cartridge and put it in a sealed Ziplock bag.
 - Bad ink cartridges could leak while in storage and cause a costly machine cleaning.
- Store the ScanTron machine and sealed ink cartridge in the original ScanTron box.
- Eventually you'll pass on the ScanTron machine to the next regional host.

Card Inventory

The official ScanTron score cards are \$1/each, so we want to keep track of them and pass them on for the next contests.

- Do not recycle/trash them.
- After your contest, make a note of how many official ScanTron cards are left over. Notify Joel Miller (jmiller@hamptonhawks.us) how many will be passed on for the next contest.
- Put extra cards in a large envelope to pass on with the ScanTron machine to the next host.

ScanTron Warranty & Maintenance

ScanTron extended our warranty to January 2025. After our warranty expires, if we have machine breakdowns we will use what is called "Time & Materials" where we ship/take the machine to Omaha, \$225/hour for labor (minimum 1 hour) and then pay for any additional parts.