

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE
For the Week of August 29, 2011
American Farm Bureau Federation

C'mon Down to the State Fair
By Tracy Taylor Grondine

Do you feel the excitement building? You can smell it in the air. It's time for the annual state fair, the ultimate celebration of America.

It wouldn't be summer without attending a state fair. For millions of Americans it's an opportunity to see young entrepreneurs shine, experience some top-notch entertainment and, of course, lose all inhibition when it comes to sampling every type of food imaginable.

The first official U.S. state fair was held in Detroit, Mich., in 1849. As a means to celebrate the harvest, state fairs originally just showcased livestock and various competitions. Now, state fairs have taken on a carnival-like atmosphere and have grown so large they demand hundreds of acres of real estate space. Larger fairs, like those in Arizona, Iowa, Minnesota and Oklahoma, can see more than a million visitors over the span of several weeks.

And that's a good thing.

No matter how large state fairs have grown, agriculture is still the backbone that holds them together. Fairgoers experience agricultural games, activities, competitions and events, ranging from cooking demonstrations to livestock shows. Many state Farm Bureaus take the lead by hosting agriculture-related events. For example, this year the Ohio Farm Bureau housed a diverse collection of displays representing the state's agricultural industries including vegetable production, floriculture, scarecrows, nuts and Christmas trees.

As far as livestock goes, there's never a shortage. Fairgoers can view a wide range of livestock breed events, including commercial cattle and beef competitions, dairy cattle shows, poultry showmanship, sheep shearing demonstrations and swine competitions.

While state fairs are about tradition, organizers are always looking for new and exciting events to entice the public. For example, the Oregon State Fair this year introduced "Pairings," which teams chefs and wineries together. In Minnesota, the historical society is offering a walking tour of the fair, available for the first time. And, in honor of its 100th anniversary, the Iowa State Fair butter cow has been replicated using thousands of cans of farmer-produced food.

And speaking of the food...Where else can you get food on-a-stick? Fairgoers can consume anything from Tater Tots on-a-stick to chocolate-covered jalapeno peppers on-a-stick to chai tea on-a-stick.

And let's not forget the pie-eating contests (who can forget the infamous blueberry pie scene from the movie "Stand by Me"). These confectionary contests are at the heart of Americana.

So, grab your kids, your walking shoes and some elastic waistband pants and come on down to the state fair.