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What have I done for conservation lately? When I learned of this year's conservation speech topic, I decided that the best thing I could do to benefit this important mission would be to focus on the next generation. What could I do with our youth that would make them more mindful of the challenges we face in protecting our natural resources, and how our choices impact our environment?

Because I work with younger kids through 4-H, I decided to put together a fun quiz using the interactive app called Kahoot, to pick their brains, so to speak. Using a variety of questions, I could find out how much they know, bring up conservation topics they'd probably never thought of before, and then share some facts with them.

Let me share with you today, how my idea of engaging these young kids was time well spent.

For my first question, I chose a topic that most all kids are curious about - insects. In our gardens, pastures, and fields, would it be better if there were more insects or fewer insects?

Most kids chose "fewer" when the correct answer is, of course, more! Most folks are surprised to learn that the vast majority of insects are not pests at all. In fact, for every insect pest, there are 1,700 good insects that help agriculture or people in some way! Beneficial insects like bees pollinate many food crops. Dung beetles and other decomposers clean up rotten dead things and recycle manure. Ladybugs eat the eggs and larva of garden pests like cucumber and potato beetles; they are your best friend in the garden.

Sadly, I learned that scientists are seeing a steady drop in numbers of **all** insects. Our farms are going to be less productive without them. We can learn how to turn this trend around by using regenerative ag practices like crop diversity that creates a better environment for insect diversity.

Now, who would have thought that insects would be an important conservation topic?

Another question I put before the kids was "What is a buffer strip?" Is it 1) something you use to whiten your teeth 2) a strip placed along the driveway to keep rocks off the lawn, 3) or grass and other plants growing alongside a creek or waterway.

Yes \, buffer strips are grass and other natural vegetation left undisturbed along creek banks.

This strip of vegetation acts like a filter that keeps sediment from running off the field, as well as any farm chemicals that have been put on that field, out of the waterway. This grassy area is also a protected spot for wildlife and a place for insects to thrive, a need we talked about earlier.

Moving on with the quiz.....

What is the single most important building block on a farm and ranch? Is it 1) trees 2) water 3) soil, or 4) grassland?

I noticed it took the kids longer to answer this question. Half of them were surprised that the most important building block is soil. You can give your soil a health check up when using a spade to dig up some worms for fishing. The best soil will have lots of worms and the soil will be loose and crumbly.

Now let's think about what we can do to improve our soil.

Which of the following is **not** a good practice for promoting soil health?

1) planting radishes and turnips in the fall 2) disking up the field before planting 3) grazing livestock on the field in the winter

I was proud of my club members when the majority of them knew that disking was not a good practice for soil health. We are learning more and more that no-till practices, not disturbing the soil by disking or plowing it up, actually helps protect and improve the soil in many ways. It keeps the soil from drying out. The corn stalks and other residue on the field break down into organic matter to feed the living organisms under the soil.

Let's go back to those field radishes and turnips. These along with oats, rye and other seed mixes are called "cover crops" because they do just that - keep the soil covered after the fall harvest or in the spring. The roots of the cover crops feed the earth worms and soil microbes underground.

When cover crops are used and cattle are allowed to feed on them, even more nutrients are recycled back into the soil. Cover crops and cattle go hand in hand.

As I put together this conservation quiz for the kids along with some informative explanations, I found that I learned some new things as well, which I suspect is the purpose of this speech contest. There is always more that we can learn about protecting our natural resources and the challenges we face right here in our own ag community. I now have more confidence in the youth of my generation to make resource conservation a priority.

Thank you.