



Soil and Plant Science Division Technical Soil Services South Central Soil Survey Region



75th National Land and Range Judging Contest, May 5–7, 2026

Altus, Stillwater, and Woodward, Oklahoma, Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) Soil Survey Offices (SSOs)

Purpose

In May, 4-H and FFA students from across the country participated in the 75th National Land and Range Judging Contest at Lake El Reno in Oklahoma. At the request of Oklahoma NRCS State Soil Scientist Dr. Steven McGowen, Soil Scientists Tyson Morley and Tyler Kemp from the Altus MLRA SSO, Soil Scientist Jeremy Dennis from the Stillwater MLRA SSO, and Soil Scientists Yanuel Rosado and Brandon Vaverka from the Woodward MLRA SSO provided support for the setup and execution of the contest (fig. 1). As part of the request, the Soil and Plant Science Division (SPSD) staff also answered land judging questions at practice pits, prepared the official national contest site, and monitored each site during the official contest day. SPSD staff played a central support role in the 2026 National Land and Range Judging Contest, working alongside Oklahoma NRCS staff to assist contestants, coaches, and contest organizers.

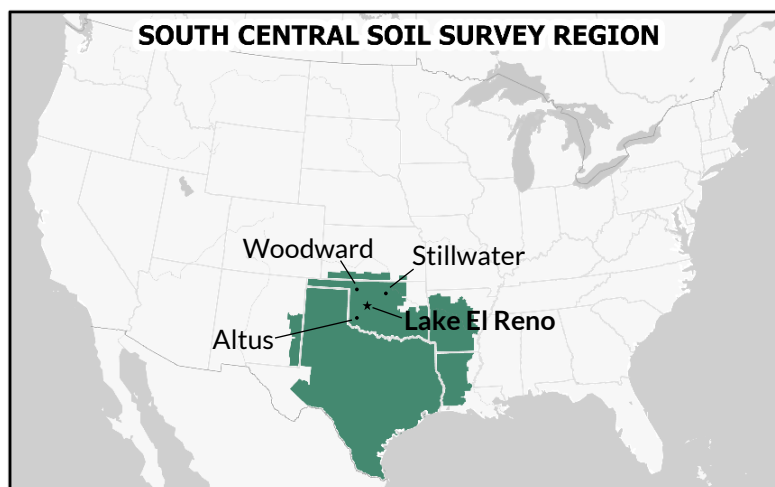


Figure 1.—Map showing the location of Lake El Reno and the Altus, Stillwater, and Woodward MLRA SSOs in the South Central Soil Survey Region.

Background

SPSD staff joined Oklahoma resource soil scientists at the Lake El Reno practice sites on Tuesday, May 5. Staff monitored each practice pit, provided technical guidance, and answered questions from students and coaches throughout the day (fig. 2). Interactions primarily focused on helping participants correctly identify soil horizons, understand key judging criteria, and interpret soil properties such as erosion, permeability, and slope (fig. 3). SPSD staff also coordinated with 4-H and FFA coaches to clarify contest rules and ensure students were practicing consistently with national standards.



Figure 2.—A contestant determining the depth of topsoil for erosion calculation.



Figure 3.—A contestants using a small knife to assist in determining boundaries between the topsoil and subsoil. Clipboards have a dual purpose of holding score cards and measuring depths in the pits.

On Wednesday, May 6, half the staff remained at Lake El Reno to continue providing one-on-one instruction and fielding questions, while the remaining SPSD and Oklahoma NRCS staff traveled to the undisclosed contest location to assist with site setup, pit preparation, and final quality checks. During the day, Assistant Chief Jimmy Emmons visited the practice area where SPSD staff briefed them on participant turnout, soil conditions, and preparation progress.

On Thursday, May 7, 2026, all SPSP staff were at the national contest site. Each staff member was responsible for a specific judging pit. Duties included monitoring participants, providing judging instructions, maintaining soil sample buckets with representative topsoil and subsoil material, and ensuring the integrity and consistency of each judging station throughout the competition (fig. 4). The day concluded with the awards banquet at the Canadian County Expo Center, where SPSP staff engaged with students, coaches, and partners and represented NRCS at the closing ceremony.



Figure 4.—Contestants filling in score cards, determining slope, and reading site condition signs.

Key Outcomes

The National Land and Range Judging Contest remains one of Oklahoma's largest and most impactful partnership events, supported by the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts, NRCS as the primary technical lead, and more than 30 sponsors. SPSP's involvement significantly strengthened both the technical quality of the event and the educational value for participating students.

SPSP staff provided critical technical soil services throughout practice days and contest preparation, ensuring that each judging site met NRCS standards for scientific integrity and consistency. Their guidance helped contestants deepen their understanding of soil properties, improve their accuracy in land-judging decisions, and gain confidence through direct interaction with professional soil scientists. Students benefited from tailored explanations, real-world examples, and hands-on instruction that clarified complex concepts such as horizon differentiation, erosion, permeability, and land capability.



During the official contest, SPSP's careful preparation and monitoring of each pit created a fair and uniform competitive environment. This consistency allowed contestants to focus fully on applying their skills and reinforced the value of precise, science-based evaluation.

Special recognition is extended to Oklahoma NRCS State Soil Scientist Dr. Steven McGowen and Assistant Professor at Oklahoma State University Dr. Daniel Adamson whose leadership and preparation ensured fairness, reliability, and scientific rigor across all sites. Their months of planning—supported by SPSP staff—helps ensure this premier national contest continues to inspire the next generation of conservation leaders.