

163rd county fair gets under way

By Ryan Whisner Union regional editor | Posted: Wednesday, July 8, 2015 9:55 am

JEFFERSON — The 2015 Jefferson County Fair kicked off this morning with Kids' Day, offering discounts on admissions and carnival ride specials.

Cattle, swine, sheep, dairy cows, poultry and horses arrived Tuesday.

Registration was down slightly with 840 entries in junior class entries compared to 860 last year. Among the most dramatic difference was within the poultry classes, where a total of 320 entries — excluding eggs, posters and showmanship — were registered, or about half of last year's total.

Poultry superintendent Lori Astell said most of the difference is in the market class related to the avian flu outbreak in Jefferson County that limited exhibitors ability to get birds during that time.

The H5 avian influenza virus first was detected in Wisconsin at a commercial chicken flock in Jefferson County on April 13, and two more county sites shortly thereafter. The affected farms were quarantined immediately and the 1.1 million birds in the flocks were “depopulated” or destroyed.

Jefferson County Fair Park director David Diestler said the biggest problem was the quarantine was not released until the end of May or early June, so some of the exhibitors did not have time to hatch the chicks or, if they wanted to buy chicks, they couldn't get them at the time.

“If they had gotten them early, they were OK, but if they were trying to get anything when the avian flu was going around, they couldn't get anything,” he said.

Diestler noted that if the 4-H or FFA members got the birds after the end of May, there was not sufficient time to get them up to weight for fair.

Astell agreed.

“We have specific weights that they have to be and they have to be in a very small window ,and if you can't order them in those weeks, you can't get them to the right size,” she said.

However, other than simply not being able to get the birds in time for fair, it did not appear that exhibitors seemed to simply opt out of participating.

The Fair Park director said it appeared there were more questions about whether there would be a poultry show in the first place.

“I think parents did a really nice job of talking with their children about the risks and weighing the benefits of showing and being able to participate with those risks,” Astell said. “I think the parents did such a nice job that we didn't have a lot of kids opt out.”

Diestler noted that according to state officials, once the temperatures regularly got past 80 degrees for a few days, the bird flu virus would be killed.

Prior to the quarantine being lifted, he said, he was reasonably certain the show would be held.

At the time of the outbreak, Jefferson County Fair Park was under the quarantine order.

Diestler explained that there was no movement of the birds, so no shows would be held that could possibly be contaminated.

“We never had anything here; it was a quarantine of the transportation because we have a lot of different shows,” he said.

A U.S. Department of Agriculture report stated in June that the disease likely spread by several means — on machinery and workers, by rodents and possibly even on the wind.

The government continues to be conducting additional analyses to better characterize environmental factors that may contribute to virus spread.

Other non-animal categories also saw some reductions in entries this fair, with 153 in the open and senior class compared to 238 last year.

Diestler partially attributed the reduction to the switchover to a system requiring online registration. However, he pointed out that it also could be that people simply did not have their entries done in time for this year’s event.

For the first time all registrations had to be completed online.

News of the change was sent out to the category superintendents, 4-H group leaders and the monthly Fair Park newsletter. He said Fair Park employees also talked about it at area senior citizen centers.

“We did a lot to get the information out,” Diestler said, noting that training was offered at the senior centers or at the Fair Park office. “We tried to make it as easy as possible.”

He pointed out that some people in the senior class simply didn’t know how to use computers. However, Fair Park officials did everything they could to train them.

Prior to the registration deadlines, anyone having problems signing up was welcome to come to the Fair Office and an employee would be willing to help them.

“People did that and it really helped and it worked out great,” the Fair Park director said.

However, in some instances, exhibitors did not want to do that or deal with computers.

Diestler said what surprised him was some of the people who did not have credit cards or did not want to use credit cards online.

The entry fee had to be paid online with a Visa, MasterCard or Discover credit or debit card. Pre-paid Visa or MasterCards also were accepted. No cash or checks was accepted.

He said it likely was more of a generational issue because the youngsters today are familiar with using a credit card online.

“We offered them suggestions of going to Walmart to getting a pre-paid card and do it that way,” Diestler said.

He said the first deadline for junior exhibitors was May 15.

“We had about four people call us then and say ‘we missed the deadline; can we do anything?’” he said.

They still had the option to get into an open class category, because that registration did not close until June 15. However, for animal-related judging, open class exhibitors can’t participate in the animal sales auctions.

After June 15, all registration was closed.

“For those people that didn’t enter, there is nothing we can do at that point,” he said. “We run into this almost every year; people miss the deadlines for whatever reason. We had the same issue again this year. “

Through the online system, each exhibitor has to create his or her own account to register entries. Required fields to create an account included division, first and last name, full address, telephone number, an email address, birthdate, age, gender, a username, a password and a security question.

Once the account is set up, entrants simply follow the directions provided and then add the categories in which they wish to compete. After all entries have been registered, entrants click “Submit Entries” and they are directed through to the billing page.

Diestler said around a half-dozen exhibitors were turned away this week due to lack of payment or registration. He said one person insisted she had signed up; however, there was no confirmation available.

“That’s fine if you can show us some kind of proof through a credit card or something like that,” he said.

Fair officials contacted Blue Ribbon Fair Management and were told there was no record of an account for that particular exhibitor.

“There was no indication they registered at all,” Diestler said.

He said there was another exhibitor who had registered but didn’t pay and had to be turned away.

“If they had a confirmation or canceled credit card that went to Blue Ribbon Fair Management, that would be fine,” he said.

However, no one was able to produce anything like that.

Generally, the Fair Park director said, registration was not treated any differently than it had been in the past.

“Every year we have these people who forget to register, by paper or online,” he said. “I know it is something new and it is hard for people to get used to.”

Diestler said the system does eliminate a lot of errors, however.

Previously, entrants would go directly to the 4-H clubs or the superintendents to register the exhibitors and mistakes could be made.

“We had people using outdated fair books,” he said. “Now it is all online and all the classes and divisions are right there.”

Diestler noted that in this scenario, more of the responsibility goes on the parents and the children. He said he

certainly did sympathize with those who were turned away due to lack of registration based on the hard work and money the children and parents had already put into a particular project.