



Helping People Help the Land

# Conservation Notes

USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service - Michigan

July/August 2016

## Conservation and Yoga in the Northwoods

India or even California may seem like a more likely place for a yoga retreat, yet if you drive east from Vanderbilt in Otsego County there it is, the Song of the Morning Yoga Retreat.

"It might look like we're in the middle of nowhere, but if this is your thing," said Carol Armour.

Armour came to live and teach at the retreat after it was created by Detroit-area businessman J. Oliver Black in 1970. The retreat hosts visitors and yoga programs and events including YogaFest, which attracts visitors from across the country and beyond each August.

Black met the yogi master Paramahansa Yogananda in 1932 and became a devoted follower. He led yoga services around Detroit, including at the Detroit Institute of Art, and he founded a non-profit organization, Golden Lotus, Inc., to promote the practice. He donated his 800-acre retreat, Song of the Morning, to the organization after his death in 1989. The retreat is adjacent to the Pigeon River Country State Forest and the river runs through the property.

"We're in a pristine forest and like to keep it that way," said Armour.

A local member of the retreat is a forester who developed a forest management plan for the property. They contacted the Otsego Conservation District for



Linda Gabby and Carol Armour, residents and board members at the Song of the Morning Yoga Retreat, stand among trees planted for a riparian buffer. The Pigeon River runs through the retreat's property in Otsego County.

assistance with plantings and were directed to NRCS for possible financial assistance.

The retreat's first project with NRCS was a high tunnel that was built in 2013. They already were doing organic gardening and the high tunnel helped them extend the growing season considerably, said Linda Gabby, who serves as the board chair for the retreat. In an area prone to unpredictable frosts, they are now able to harvest tomatoes in October, she

- continued on page 3 -



United States Department of Agriculture

### Natural Resources Conservation Service

Michigan State Office  
3001 Coolidge Road, Suite 250  
East Lansing, MI 48823  
Phone: 517/324-5270  
www.mi.nrcs.usda.gov



State Conservationist's Message	Page 2
Veterans Soil Health Field Day	4
Friends & Family Farms Field Day	4
New Mexico Envirothon Visit	5
Let the Forest Grow Naturally?	6
Wetland Mitigation Program	7
NRCS Updates & Other News	8
Event Calendar	9

# State Conservationist's Message

About 70 million acres of farm and forest land are enrolled in Conservation Stewardship Program, more than in any other USDA conservation program. The Conservation Stewardship Program was created in the 2008 Farm Bill and has since surpassed long-standing programs like the Conservation Reserve Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program in the number of acres enrolled.

CSP is targeted to producers and private forest owners who are already managing their land to address conservation concerns. In addition to other requirements for enrolling in USDA programs, applicants must meet the stewardship threshold for two of five state-specific resource concerns. After enrolling, program participants receive payments based on addressing these resource concerns and for implementing new conservation enhancements.

Since its creation, USDA has been revising and adding new conservation enhancements to CSP. Enhancements provide farmers and forest owners who are already managing the resources on their land the financial assistance to go even further in protecting the natural resources on their land.

In Ionia County, a producer implemented a controlled traffic system to improve soil health by reducing soil compaction. In a controlled traffic system the farmer uses the same lanes whenever using heavy equipment including when planting, harvesting and applying chemicals. This farmer observed better yields and improved drainage after implementing this enhancement.

In Delta County a forest owner has been managing his land since the 1980s. He is improving the

value of his land by removing low value trees and improving the quality of the hardwoods on the property. He also sees more deer on his property by improving wildlife habitat with practices such as forest clearings and understory plantings that provide food for wildlife.



State Conservationist  
Garry Lee

In the Western Lake Erie Basin, a farmer is reducing the amount

**More acres are enrolled in CSP than in any other USDA conservation program.**

of phosphorus applied on the land by utilizing variable rate application, applying only the amount needed based on soil testing. The same farm is also replacing conventional tillage with strip tilling on many of its acres.



A farmer near Traverse City has seen better sweet corn yields by planting a mixture of cover crops. The planting of a cover crop mixture is allowing the farmer to grow continuous sweet corn without the yield loss he was used to experiencing.

These are just a few examples of the many farmers in Michigan who have utilized CSP to go to the next level of land stewardship. This year CSP will have many more enhancements for producers to choose from. The large number of enhancements available provides opportunities for specialty producers, livestock producers, forest owners and commodity crop producers. . CSP also has the flexibility to allow all kinds of producers to benefit no matter the type or size of farm. The program offers a \$1,500 minimum payment to make participation worthwhile even for the smallest operations.



- continued from page 1 -

## Conservation and Yoga in the Northwoods

said. Their high tunnel collapsed under snow in 2015 but it was covered by insurance. They replaced it with a high tunnel with a stronger design.

The next project on the retreat involving NRCS was a riparian buffer in 2014. Using NRCS financial assistance and volunteers, a variety of trees were planted on a 3-acre section along the Pigeon River. Many of the trees are still shorter than the surrounding vegetation so volunteers pull the surrounding weeds each spring.

"Imagine what this is going to be," said Armour as she walked through the planting.

The following two years the retreat utilized NRCS financial assistance for planting pollinator habitat. In 2015 flowering trees and shrubs were planted and in 2016 wildflowers. The flowering plants will not only add beauty to the property but also benefit honey bees they raise. Honey from managed hives on the property is sold in the retreat's gift shop.

"The wildlife are important to us, especially because we are surrounded by the Pigeon River State Forest. Ecology, permaculture, organic production, the preservation of nature is all important to us," said Armour.

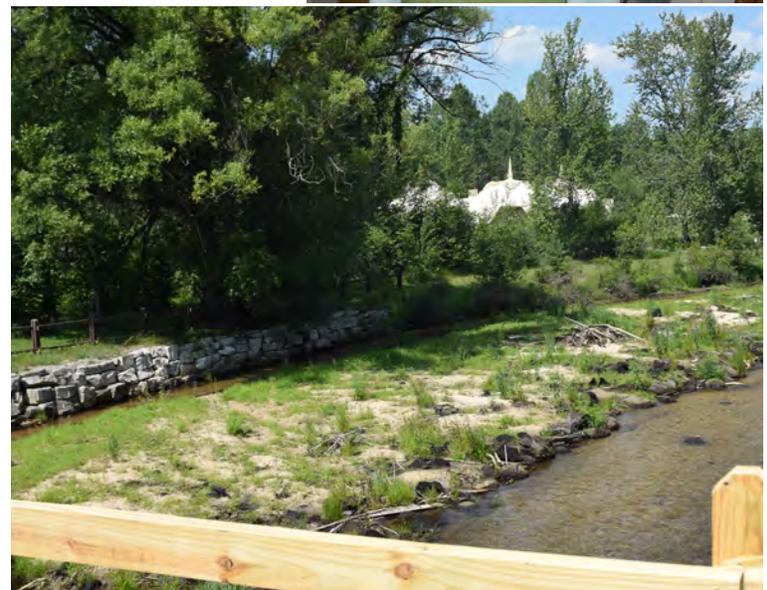
A major change was made to the property in 2015 when the retreat removed its hydroelectric dam. The dam provided most of the retreat's power until they went on the grid in 2000. The impoundment behind the dam was filling with silt and something had to be done, said Armour

The Pigeon River now winds its way across where the impounded lake was. Restoring the river is positive but it also created a negative, said Armour. The lake attracted migrating waterfowl and other migrating bird species and a pair of trumpeter swans nested there. The retreat is interested in creating a hemi-marsh on the property and is working with different government agencies to determine if some habitat can be restored.

*(right) Dormitory buildings along the Pigeon River downstream from where a hydroelectric dam was removed.*



*(above) The Pigeon River passes through the center of the Morning Yoga Retreat in Otsego County. The area was covered by a reservoir until 2014, a dam provided the retreat its electricity. The house on the left sat on the shore. (right) Carol Armour demonstrates a yoga pose, the portrait to her left is of J. Oliver Black, founder of the retreat.*



## Veteran Farmers Learn about Soil Health

Only a brief rain shower tarnished a soil health field day for military veterans at the Rose Lake Plant Materials Center on July 15. Attendees learned about cover crops, tillage and other soil health practices, ate some very good barbecue and one of them won a new truck.

About 30 veterans attended the event that was organized by the Farmer Veteran Coalition of Michigan, MSU Extension, the Shiawassee Conservation District and NRCS. MSU and NRCS conservationists provided instruction at outdoor stations around the Plant Materials Center demonstrating cover crops, soil profiles and different types of tillage. Later in the day they learned about technical and financial assistance available to veteran farmers.

Following a catered barbecue lunch, Dylan Thomas, president of the Michigan chapter of the Farmer Veteran Coalition, presented a reconditioned truck to attendee Matt VanWormer. VanWormer and his wife Missy operate Toad Hall Farm in Emmet. The flatbed truck was donated by Peterson Farms Inc., of Shelby.

The Farmer Veteran Coalition of Michigan is also hosting the national organization's annual stakeholder conference from Nov. 30 to Dec. 2, at Michigan State University. The state and national organization serve to support military veterans in agriculture by helping them find sources of financial and technical assistance.



*MSU Extension educator Paul Gross (above left) talked about different tillage practices and NRCS Biologist Jim Marshall (above right) talked about soil health principles with veterans attending the soil health field day at the Rose Lake Plant Materials Center.*

## Friends & Family Farms Field Day

Southwest Michigan producers met with potential buyers at the Annual Friends & Family Farms Field Day held near Covert on July 21.

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service arranged for representatives from area food hubs, food banks and other organizations to meet face to face with growers. NRCS, FSA and other organizations also sent representatives to talk with producers about technical and financial assistance programs. Students attended the following day to learn about careers in agriculture and conservation.



*NRCS and FSA staff speak with a local producer at the Friends & Family Farms Field Day in Covert.*

## NRCS-MI Provides Training for New Mexico Envirothon Team



*A team representing New Mexico at the North American Envirothon visited the Rose Lake Plant Materials Center to brush up on Great Lakes environmental issues in preparation for the competition. Area 3 Resource Soil Scientist Erin Segar (back row, third from left) helped host the students.*

NRCS employees gave a crash course on Great Lakes landscapes, soils and plants to a team of New Mexico high school students preparing to compete in the North American Envirothon in Ontario.

Staff at the NRCS Grand Rapids Major Land Resource Area and Area 3 office hosted the five students who were on their way to the competition in Peterborough, Ontario. The students were referred to the Grand Rapids MLRA office for instruction on environmental topics they were likely to see at the test site in Ontario.

Over two days the students visited the NRCS Rose Lake Plant Materials Center in East Lansing, the Rosy Mound Natural Area in Grand Haven and other sites where they were learned about soils, plants, invasive species and unique Great Lakes habitats.

The New Mexico team qualified to compete in the North American Envirothon by finishing first in their state competition. In Ontario, they competed against teams from across the United States and Canada. One of the teams they will compete against is a team from Glen Lake High School which won the Michigan Envirothon state competition in May.

The North American Envirothon was held from July 24 to 29. A team from the University of Toronto

Schools finished first, followed by teams from Penncrest High School from Pennsylvania and the Palisades Charter High School from California.

At Envirothon competitions, teams of five students compete in outdoor competitions testing their skills and knowledge of environmental issues such as wildlife, soils and aquatic ecology.

Envirothon competitions have been held in Michigan since 1994 and students from anywhere in the state are eligible to compete. For more information visit the Michigan Association of Conservation Districts website.



*(above) Grand Rapids MLRA Soil Survey Office Leader Matt Bromley shows the students a soil boring of muck soils at the Rose Lake PMC. (below) NRCS State Forester Andy Henriksen (far left) gives the students instruction on tree identification.*



## Why Can't We Just Let the Forest Grow Naturally?

by William Cook, Michigan State University Extension

Simple questions sometimes have rather complicated answers, and there may actually be several answers or potential outcomes. Forest management is this way, with answers that incorporate far more than just trees or even forests.

Why can't we just let the forest grow naturally? This is a common question. The shortest answer is that we can't afford to. That's not merely a matter of money. It's more a matter of goods and services, some of which we need in order to survive as a species.

Let's examine that word "naturally." What is or is not natural can be argued; however, most people might agree that "naturally"

means without further human intervention. Many people may not realize that the forests of today are largely a product of historical human intervention which is often catastrophic. The result has been significant differences in composition, structure, and function from the forests of, say, two hundred years ago. In this way, our current forests are far from "natural."

Suggesting that the forests develop "naturally" could be considered an impossibility. Nevertheless, a "let 'em go" preference involves a set of presumptions and a lack of a clear future vision. The most significant presumption, perhaps, may be that "natural" is good. What, precisely, does "good" mean?

Here is where we get into what might be called philosophical considerations. The notions of "good" and "bad" regarding natural processes are largely romantic products of human perception. This is not to say these perceptions are unimportant. However, care should be taken when applying them to nature in pragmatic ways. Whatever someone might think is "good" will not likely be the path a forest will take if left unmanaged.

Daniel Riskin wrote a book titled "Mother Nature Is Trying to Kill You". He thoughtfully and humorously teases apart the idea that nature has

any benevolent or nurturing attributions. He points out that nature doesn't give a wit about humans and argues that our survival is more of a battle with nature than a cooperative affair.

Building on Riskin's ideas, forests suffer from having an inherent visual quality that appeals to human creativity and inspiration. Unfortunately, visual quality is a particularly poor measure of ecological integrity. We tend to believe that what looks good, must be good. Then, what looks bad must be bad. Nature doesn't care what we think. Forest management relies upon much more than visual quality, although many times that is what rules the day, despite many values to the contrary.



A person could argue that a certain forest equilibrium was present before Euro-Americans flooded into what was to become the Lake States. That presumes the native tribes had little influence, which is not accurate, but that's another story. Our current forests might eventually develop some new state of equilibrium but it wouldn't be the same as before. Those days will not be seen again, even if

humans disappear from the planet.

If left to itself, what sort of future might the forest have? This question brings us back into the realm of science. Future forest conditions can be predicted with a reasonable amount of certainty, even when multiple pathways are possible. Different forests will have different pathways. Foresters and forest ecologists are knowledgeable about these sorts of things. Their crystal balls are based more on science than mysticism.

Various factors exert pressures on the forest that affect future conditions. Lifespans of trees, regeneration, deer browsing, shade tolerance, insect and disease agents, disturbances, exotic species, stand histories, climate change and current conditions are some of those factors.

One thing is absolutely certain: the way that a

- continued on page 7 -

## Michigan Selected for USDA Wetland Mitigation Program

Michigan was one of 10 states selected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to participate in the Wetland Mitigation Banking Program to help farmers comply with wetland conservation requirements.

The Wetland Mitigation Banking Program, created by the 2014 Farm Bill, helps states, local governments or other qualified partners develop wetland mitigation banks that restore, create, or enhance wetland ecosystems, broadening the conservation options available to farmers and ranchers so they can maintain eligibility for other USDA programs. The program will receive \$7 million in funding.

Wetland mitigation banking uses a market-based approach to restore, create or enhance wetlands in one place to compensate for unavoidable impacts to wetlands at another location. Banked wetland mitigation credits are made available after the restoration, creation or enhancement of previously converted wetlands protected by a conservation easement. Wetland mitigation requires



the replacement of all lost wetland functions, values and acres.

Producers can buy credits from wetlands mitigation banks to compensate for the impact of lost wetlands. The size and scope of the wetland restoration, creation or enhancement activities determine the quantity of credits available for sale. The price of credits is negotiated between the buyer and seller.

In Michigan, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality will receive \$1 million in USDA funding to establish a wetland mitigation

bank. The project will target both state-owned land and land with expiring enrollment in the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program.

For more information visit the [Conservation Compliance and Wetland Mitigation Banking web page](#).

*-continued from page 6-*

## Why Can't We Just Let the Forest Grow Naturally?

particular forest appears today will not be the way that forest will appear in the future, especially without management. Forests are remarkably dynamic ecosystems.

Will benign neglect produce a future forest with a desirable set of attributes? Probably not.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "The best way to predict your future is to create it." Reforming that idea, the best way to produce a set of future forest conditions is through forest management.

The hard part of this concept is to agree upon what mix of forest conditions we want to have. These are decisions made at a higher altitude than simply implementing a forest management plan. Regardless of the particular vision, or visions, we can obtain more goods and services through management. Nature does not serve us. However, we can use our knowledge of natural processes to achieve better outcomes beneficial to humans.

There are more and more people every year. The

amount of forest that is open to management is shrinking. It's not too difficult to envision a line graph where these two lines cross and problems develop. In this way, forest management is more of an imperative and a social responsibility, not that every forested acre needs to be actively managed.

Wood is the single most environmentally responsible raw material at our disposal and is essential to our survival. Wood comes from forests and forests provide a host of essential environmental services beyond wood. Forest management is what ties all these things together to help secure a better future for both forests and human generations to come.

Can we just let our forests grow without intervention? Certainly. However, our children and grandchildren will likely suffer the consequences.

*This article was published by Michigan State University Extension. For more information, visit [www.msue.msu.edu](http://www.msue.msu.edu).*

## MSU Offering Grazing School

Michigan State University Extension is offering grazing school for dairy, livestock and small ruminant producers at three locations in Michigan simultaneously via high speed video conferencing in September.

There will be a team of experts at each location that will broadcast their expertise to the different sites with technology that allows for interactive chat from participants. This new technology allows for additional expertise to be shared and expanded networking of producers through various online and face-to-face discussions.

Grazing school will be held from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sept. 22 and 23. It will be held at three locations; the MSU W.K. Kellogg Biological Station Farm and Dairy Meeting Room in Hickory Corners, the MSU Lake City Research Center in Lake City, and Bay Mills Community College in Brimley.

Feature presentations will cover approaches to:

- Introduction to managed grazing
- Pasture management and decision making
- Livestock nutrition and requirements on pasture
- Forage yield determination and pasture allocation
- Grass and legume species identification
- Pasture soil fertility and management
- Grazing systems, layout and design
- Water systems and requirements
- Building and using fence for grazing
- Pasture establishment and improvement

Participants only need to attend the closest location to participate in the full school and gain the expertise of speakers around the state. The goal of the school is to blend classroom instruction with in-field education and the latest animal/forage research to give participants an in-depth introduction to grazing management.

Registration is \$125 for one participant; \$220 for two participant from the same farm, and \$315 for three participants from the same farm. The registration deadline is September 18, 2016. After the deadline, fees are \$150 for one participant, \$270 for two participants from the same farm, and \$390 for three participants from the same farm. The workshop fee includes notebooks, resource materials, and all meals. For more information go to [msue.anr.msu.edu](http://msue.anr.msu.edu).

## USDA Unveils Urban Ag Toolkit

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack unveiled the USDA Urban Agriculture Toolkit, a new resource created by USDA's Know Your Farmer team



to help entrepreneurs and community leaders successfully create jobs and increase access to healthy food through urban agriculture.

From neighborhood gardens grown on repurposed lots, to innovative mobile markets and intensive hydroponic and aquaculture operations, urban food production is rapidly growing into a mature business sector in cities across the country.

Industry estimates show U.S. local food sales totaled at least \$12 billion in 2014, up from \$5 billion in 2008, and experts anticipate that value to hit \$20 billion by 2019. The numbers also show that these opportunities are helping to drive job growth in agriculture, increase entrepreneurship and expand food access and choice.

USDA's Toolkit is an electronic document that helps urban and small farms navigate more than 70 helpful resources, including technical assistance and financing opportunities. It focuses on some of the most pressing challenges confronting urban producers such as land access, soil quality, water resources, capital and financing, infrastructure, market development, production strategies, and applying for federal, state or private foundation grants. University extension service partners in Chicago and Indianapolis helped develop cost estimates for starting urban farms and the toolkit includes information on best practices and check lists for start-ups and early-stage producers planning outdoor or indoor operations.

Launched in 2009, KYF2 breaks down silos and takes stock of USDA programs that support the growing demand for local and regional food systems. Visit the KYF2 website at [www.usda.gov/knowyourfarmer](http://www.usda.gov/knowyourfarmer) to find local and regional food system resources in your community.



# Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events

## September

- 7 Conservation/MAEAP Bus Tour, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., tour begins at Washtenaw Farm Bureau - Ann Arbor, to register call 734/429-1420 or email rbooth@ctyfb.com
- 8 Fall Conservation Update and Plot Tour, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Mason Technology Center - Mason, for more information contact the Eaton Conservation District at 517/543-1512 ext. 5
- 9 2016 Fall Tour, 5 to 8 p.m., Lundberg Bros. Dairy - Pentwater, contact the Mason-Lake Conservation District for more information at 231/757-3707 ext. 5
- 10 Benzie-Manistee Agriculture Field Day, 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., 8633 Maidens Rd. - Bear Lake, call the Manistee Conservation District for more information and to register, 231/889-9666 or email scott.hughey@mi.usda.gov
- 10 Sauk River Clean Up, Branch County, to volunteer call 517/278-2725 or email kathy.worst@mi.nacdnet.net
- 10 Pastured Livestock Tour, 1 to 6 p.m., MSU Extension Center- Chatham, for more information call 906/439-5114 or email coleman98@msu.edu
- 11 Great Outdoor Jamboree, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Lake Hudson Recreation Area - Lenawee County, for more information call 517/467-7401 or go to [michiganpheasantsforever.org](http://michiganpheasantsforever.org)
- 14 Sanilac Conservation District Annual Meeting and Cover Crop Day, 4 to 8 p.m., Cliff Gordon Farm - Crosswell, for more information and to RSVP call 810/648-2998 ext. 5
- 14 Mecosta-Montcalm Conservation Tour, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., meet at St. Bernadette of Lourde's Church - Stanton, register by Sept. 9 by calling 989/831-4606 ext. 5
- 15 Shiawassee Conservation Tour, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., meet at county fair ground pavilion - Corunna, for more information call 989/723-8263 ext. 3
- 16 Soil and Water Conservation Society Highway Clean Up, meet at noon, NRCS State Office - East Lansing
- 17 Forest Management Workshop and Tree Farm Field Day, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Misty Acres: Borwell Preserve - Benzonia, contact the Manistee Conservation District to register at 231/889-9666 or email joshua.shields@macd.org

## September ctd.

- 17 Jackson County Family Farmfest, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., for more information call 517/788-4292
- 17 Post-Harvest Forest Tour, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., meet at Liberty Township Hall - Manton, for more information and to RSVP call 231/775-7681 ext. 3 or email larry.czelusta@macd.org
- 20 Soil Health Field Day, 3 to 7 p.m., Marion, for more information call the Osceola-Lake Conservation District at 231/832-2950
- 22 Cover Crops & Soil Health Field Day, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Alan Seifke Farm - Burlington, for more information and to RSVP call 269/781-4867 ext. 140 or email jeremiah.swain@mi.nacdnet.net
- 22 Leelanau Conservation District 5th Grade Field Day, Veronica Valley Park - Bingham Township, call the Leelanau Conservation District for more information at 231/256-9783
- 23 Fall Tree Identification & Forestry Bus Tour, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., meet at Chippewa Hills High School - Remus, register by Sept. 16 by calling 989/831-4606 ext. 5
- 24 Conservation Expo, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., AuSable River Center - Roscommon, for more information call 989/275-3163 or 989/275-4295

## October

- 1-15 Annual Fall Beach Grass Harvest, volunteers needed, contact the Charlevoix Conservation District for more information at 231/582-6193
- 15 Adopt-a-Stream Collection Event, 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., call the Jackson Conservation District for more information at 517/395-2089

## November

- 4 Leelanau Conservation District Annual Meeting & Open House, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Government Building - Suttons Bay



*In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.*

*Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.*