



Helping People Help the Land

Conservation Notes

USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service - Michigan

November/December 2015

NRCS Helps Antrim Farmer Grow Food

“I like to grow food.”

It’s as simple as that for Antrim County farmer Ryan Romeyn. Romeyn and his wife Andrea operate Providence Organic Farm near Central Lake where they grow a bounty of fruits and vegetables along with raising sheep, cattle and hogs. The couple started out with 5 acres in 2008 and have expanded to 20.

“Theirs is the most incredible success story,” said NRCS District Conservationist Pepper Bromelmeier. Bromelmeier has worked with the Romeyns from the beginning as they expanded into livestock and high tunnel production. The Romeyns have implemented numerous conservation practices on their farm with financial assistance from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). As organic farmers, they are able to utilize EQIP funds targeted specifically for organic producers.

The farm is divided into half-acre strips with a diverse rotation of vegetables in addition to cover crops and grazing. The Romeyns raise a wide variety of vegetables that are sold almost equally through a 200-member community supported agriculture (CSA) membership, area farmers markets and wholesale to restaurants and processors. Members of the CSA receive weekly shares of vegetables throughout the growing season for an annual fee. Weekly shares are picked up at the farm or at a number of designated locations between Petoskey and



Ryan (above) and Andrea Romeyn grow organic vegetables and raise livestock on their farm in Antrim County. They utilize cover crops like radishes (above) to improve soil health on their farm.

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State Conservationist's Message

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program is our agency's primary tool to put conservation on working agricultural land and private forests. During fiscal year 2015, NRCS provided over \$12 million in conservation financial assistance to Michigan producers. These funds are targeted to address natural resource concerns at the national, regional, state and local level.

In Michigan, EQIP funds were targeted to increase local food production in Wayne County through the High Tunnel System practice and assisted farmers participating in the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program. At the regional level, NRCS provided funding to help farmers in the Western Lake Erie Basin, which includes portions of Michigan, Ohio and Indiana, implement practices to improve water quality. Funding was also available for landowners to improve habitat for honey bees as part of a national effort to address the decline in honey bee colonies.

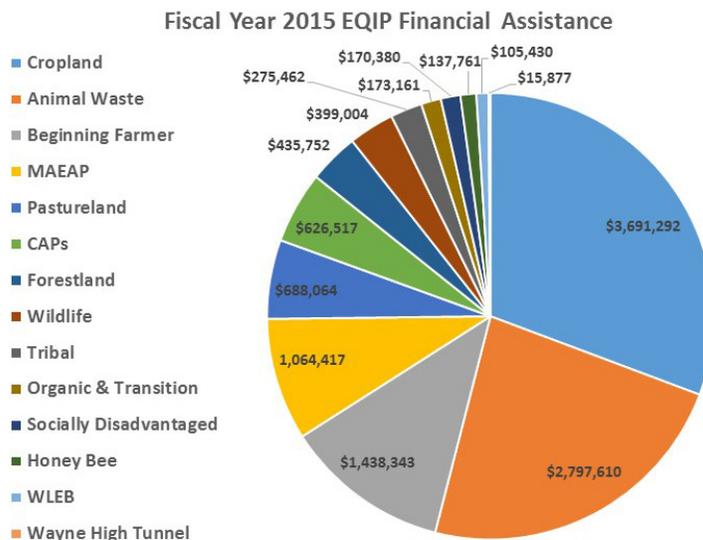
EQIP funding pools are also used to address resource concerns related to different agricultural sectors such as livestock production, forestry, field crops and organic. Conservation Activity Plans are a way for producers to use several EQIP practices to focus on specific resource needs such as nutrient management, integrated pest management and many others. As you can see from this chart, the

EQIP "pie" is divided into many slices.

Another way EQIP funds are allocated is for unique groups of producers, these include beginning farmers and socially-disadvantaged farmers. Socially disadvantaged producers belong to groups who have been subject to racial or ethnic prejudice. A beginning farmer is defined by NRCS as a producer who has operated a farm for not than 10 consecutive years. Both of these groups greatly benefit from this targeted source of technical and financial assistance.



State Conservationist
Garry Lee



The chart above shows the allocation of fiscal year 2015 EQIP financial assistance in Michigan by funding pool. The funding pools are listed in order from the largest portion of EQIP assistance (cropland) the smallest.

the conservation practices EQIP helps pay for benefit everyone by protecting the water, air and soil we depend on for life.

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NRCS Assistance Helps Antrim Farm Raise More Food

Traverse City.

"It's exciting to grow more food and there's a need for it," said Ryan. "I'll grow it and then find a market, which isn't the smartest."

Long-term vegetable production is hard on soil because of the continuous cultivation required on an organic farm. All of the Romeyn farm land has a cover crop for at least part of the year. A rye cover crop is planted after late harvesting crops and a mix of cover crops, including a legume, are planted on crops harvested during the summer. They would eventually like to take half of their land out of production each year and plant it with a cover crop mix including legumes to restore the soil. Now they do regular soil testing and apply organically-approved compost.

Livestock is a relatively new addition to the farm and they are still in a growing phase, said Ryan. The animals are grazed on areas of the farm with less productive soils and also on the vegetable plots after harvesting. The Romeyns utilized EQIP funds for their livestock operation including prescribed grazing, fencing and waterlines.

It's good for soil health to have livestock on a vegetable farm, said Bromelmeier.

The Romeyns are selling two beef cattle a year and hope to grow to about five or six a year. They will butcher eight sheep this year and are raising about 20 to 25 hogs a year. Their 200-member CSA is a good market for the organic meat the farm produces, said Ryan.

In 2012, the Romeyns installed a high tunnel system on their farm with EQIP financial assistance. They built the 30-by-96-foot high tunnel from a kit themselves. The high tunnel allows them to grow spinach, lettuce and other greens in the spring which are followed by tomatoes and cucumbers in the summer. With the short growing season in northern Michigan, the high tunnel allows the farm to produce even more food.



Ryan Romeyn (above) shows a plot of organic tomatoes on his farm in Antrim County. Romeyn, with NRCS District Conservationist Pepper Bromelmeier, utilized EQIP financial assistance to build a high tunnel system in 2012.



The Romeyns have utilized NRCS conservation funds through EQIP as well as the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). In addition to the conservation practices already mentioned, they have used EQIP funds to install windbreaks, pollinator-friendly field borders, cover crops and mulching. Through CSP, they implemented soil testing, as well as water, pest and nutrient management plans.

As long as there is a demand the Romeyns will continue to grow healthy organic food for their friends and neighbors.

Veteran Oil Driller Becomes Beginning Farmer

John Gordon is not what most people would envision as a beginning farmer. He's worked in the oil business since 1972 but is now starting up a livestock operation on 56 acres in Kalkaska County.

"I'm an old man but I'm a beginning farmer," said Gordon.

His parents bought the farm in the 1960s and moved the family there from Detroit. It was not a working farm while his parents owned it, Gordon conceded. They kept a few horses and cattle but on a very small scale. Gordon and his brother Joe now have bigger plans for the farm, and they are utilizing financial and technical assistance from NRCS to help make it happen.

"I'm a really good directional driller but I'm a poor farmer," said Gordon. "What's good about working with NRCS is they design everything." NRCS worked with Gordon to develop a prescribed grazing plan for his farm including laying out grazing paddocks and designing a livestock watering system. Gordon hopes to raise about 30 beef cattle a year along with 1,000 to 2,000 laying hens, raised in "chicken trailers."

Gordon began raising cattle on the farm in 2014, he has 12 belted Galloway cattle that produced four calves this year. The cattle graze on land that his parents once planted to Christmas trees. He sold all of the trees for \$1,000 and converted the land to pasture. He moves the cattle between fenced paddocks regularly so that the forage can recover faster. By following his prescribed grazing plan Gordon hopes to graze cattle until November before having to bring feed to them.

Gordon is currently working in the oil fields in North Dakota, working 14 days on and 14 off. While he's back in Michigan, Gordon has been active with the Kalkaska Conservation District. He helped the district with tree planting and even cooked hamburgers at a soil health event. Gordon's farm is already verified through the Michigan Environmental Quality Incentives Program. He is in the process of installing a fueling facility that meets MAEAP requirements. "It's all good policy," he said of the MAEAP verification process. Until the facility is



Beginning farmer John Gordon with some of his Galloway cattle on his farm in Kalkaska County. The farm's livestock also includes chickens raised in a chicken trailer.



completed he will continue to haul fuel to the farm.

In addition to NRCS technical assistance, Gordon used financial assistance from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to make improvements to his farm. NRCS sets aside a portion of its EQIP funds to assist beginning farmers. Some of the practices he implemented include well decommissioning, prescribed grazing, forage and biomass planting, and fencing. By making conservation improvements, Gordon hopes to keep the farm in the family for future generations.

"It was just a wonderful place to grow up and I hope my grandkids can grow up here."

High Tunnel Helps Keweenaw Farmer Provide Local Food

Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula is a less than ideal environment for growing tomatoes. However, grower Billy Lell is finding out that if you can grow them, the customers will come.

Lell built a high tunnel system on his farm in October, 2014, with financial assistance from the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program. A high tunnel system is a metal framed structure covered in plastic that enables farmers like Lell to extend the growing season for fruits and vegetables. Extending the growing season is important for Lell, whose farm outside of Houghton is only 2 miles from Lake Superior.

It's difficult to grow tomatoes outside due to the short growing season in the Keweenaw Peninsula, said Lell. With his high tunnel system, he now harvests multiple tomato crops in a single year. It turns out fresh, locally-grown tomatoes sell really well in April.

"I've not had any trouble selling everything that I grew in here," said Lell. "It sells as fast as it comes out."

It takes a strong structure to withstand the 420 inches of snow his farm received last January along with winds of up to 70 miles-per-hour. Lell invested in extra bracing, 4 feet instead of 6 feet between trusses in the high tunnel's metal frame, and a second layer of plastic over it so that a layer of air would provide insulation. He also installed a heater to keep the high tunnel at least 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Lell uses a snow blower to clear a path around the outside of the tunnel otherwise snow melting off the roof would pile up and collapse the structure, he said.

"If you're going to grow anything up here you need a heater in the hoop house. Or else you're better off not putting it up," said Lell. "Tomatoes will pay for the heat they use."

When the high tunnel system was first established as a conservation practice eligible



*Houghton County
farmer Billy Lell*

for EQIP financial assistance, producers were not allowed to heat them. That restriction was removed for both existing and new high tunnel systems funded through EQIP. However, financial assistance is not available for heating equipment for high tunnels.

Lell sells most of his produce at the Keweenaw Co-op in Hancock and to members of his community supported agriculture enterprise. Members of the CSA receive regular allotments of fresh vegetables for a set membership price. Members can also provide labor to offset the costs of their membership.

Tomatoes and eggplant are Lell's major high tunnel crops. He plants them in late August and will harvest them until Christmas. He then



Lell uses a heater to keep his high tunnel at a minimum of 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

switches to cold season crops like basil and spinach and will plant another crop of tomatoes around the third week of February. Getting maximum production of tomatoes is labor intensive, said Lell. After finding the best variety to grow, he prunes the plants twice a week, removing any stems that don't have flowers.

"You can either grow leaves or tomatoes, not both in any quantity."

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Alternatives to Hinge Cutting for Improving Forest Habitat

Michigan Department of Natural Resources

About 1 million Michigan residents took to the woods this fall to take part in the deer hunting season. Whether you are a deer hunter or a bird watcher, many forest landowners work hard all year to manage their forest to provide suitable habitat for the birds and animals that they enjoy watching.

“Hinge cutting” is a habitat management technique that is becoming popular among deer hunters in Michigan. Hinge cutting is a method to cut down a tree using only a back cut that does not fully sever the tree’s trunk from the stump, leaving the fallen tree connected to the stump by a “hinge” of bark. The intent is to keep the fallen tree alive for a while to provide deer with browse for food, bedding habitat, and to direct their traffic flow in the woods.

Many professional foresters and wildlife biologists have questions about hinge cutting as a habitat management technique. Hinge cutting has not been researched in controlled scientific studies, so there are not any data to support the wildlife habitat benefits claimed by its proponents. Hinge cutting might provide good habitat for deer, but landowners have other habitat management options that produce greater long-term habitat benefits for wildlife.

The strongest argument against hinge cutting



is human safety. Cutting down a tree with a chainsaw is an inherently dangerous activity, and hinge cutting greatly increases the risk to the chainsaw operator and others in the woods. Hinge cutting violates the basic rules for safely felling a tree. Hinge cutting a tree of any size could result in the tree snapping back toward the operator or a “barber chair” where the tree splits suddenly and falls straight down on the operator.

Hunters and landowners using a chainsaw in their woods should do everything possible to maximize their safety. Always wear personal protective equipment (helmet, eye and ear protection, chaps, gloves and boots). Never stand near a tree being cut down by another person. Always use proper techniques to safely fell a tree of any size. Know how to operate your saw. Get safety training and follow the rules that keep you safe. If professional tree fellers like loggers and arborists refuse to practice hinge cutting, why should an amateur risk their life for possibly better habitat?

There are alternatives to hinge cutting for managing your forest habitat.

First, work with a qualified natural resource professional when seeking advice about your habitat management options. Look for proper credentials (formal education, on-the-job training, certifications, insurance, compliance

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High Tunnel Helps Keweenaw Farmer Provide Local Food

Lell spent most of his professional career as a civilian employee with the Department of Defense working as a computer engineer. He learned about farming growing up on a farm in Missouri and working as a migrant laborer. For five months a year his family would travel all over the Midwest and as far as the east coast picking and planting vegetables.

“It was either starve or travel,” said Lell.

After retiring, Lell and his wife Judy wanted to buy a small farm. They have extended family in Michigan and fell in love with the Upper Peninsula from visiting on vacations. Lell estimated that he looked at 200 properties before purchasing his farm near Houghton. They love the country and the people of the Upper Peninsula and now they’re providing them with fresh vegetables, year-around.

PSAs Promote Mid-Michigan Conservaton Efforts

Three Mid-Michigan conservaton districts along with Greening Mid-Michigan produced four video public service announcements highlighting the organizations' conservation efforts.

The videos include success stories from Greening Mid-Michigan efforts and feature conservation districts, agriculture, water quality and outreach. The organization is a regional planning partnership targeting "green infrastructure" including public parks and open spaces.

Greening Mid-Michigan works to improve access and utilization of existing green infrastructure by community members and visitors. Developing non-motorized paths and trails to connect parks and open spaces is one goal. Preserving, ehancing and protecting green infrastructure is another of the group's objectives.

The conservation districts involved include Eaton, Clinton and Ingham. Greening Mid-Michigan also includes the Tri-County Regional



The image above is from a public service announcement highlighting the conservation efforts of Greening Mid-Michigan.

Planning Commission and a number of regional government agencies and non-profit organizations.

The PSA videos can be viewed on the [Eaton Conservaton District Youtube site](#).

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Alternatives to Hinge Cutting for Improving Forest Habitat

with OSHA laws, etc.) when hiring a professional forester, wildlife biologist, or qualified logging professional. These professionals can help you improve your wildlife habitat, while also managing for additional land improvement goals.

Second, commercial timber harvesting practices create wildlife habitat benefits that equal or exceed hinge cutting. Standard forest management techniques can provide food and cover for a longer period, over a greater area, than do-it-yourself hinge cutting. You can greatly reduce your personal risk, and possibly increase your income, by hiring a forester to administer a timber sale conducted by a professional logger. Work with your forester to accomplish multiple land management goals.

Third, when you are doing your next habitat improvement project in your woods, please fell trees using the safest possible techniques. A hinge cut tree will soon be just as dead as a

tree cut down with safer techniques. Learn to identify tree species so you can keep the trees that provide multiple benefits, and harvest the trees that do not help you accomplish your habitat goals. Retain mast producing trees like oak, beech, hickory, and serviceberry as they produce natural food sources for deer and other wildlife. Read the "Managing Michigan's Wildlife: A Landowner's Guide" to get a basic understanding of forest ecology and wildlife management. Keep up the good work in your woods!

If you would like to work with a natural resource professional to improve your wildlife habitat, there are 125 professional foresters and five wildlife biologists who can help you develop a Forest Stewardship Plan for your property. If you would like to discuss alternatives to hinge cutting, please contact Mike Smalligan, DNR Forest Stewardship Coordinator, at 517-284-5884 or smalliganm@michigan.gov.

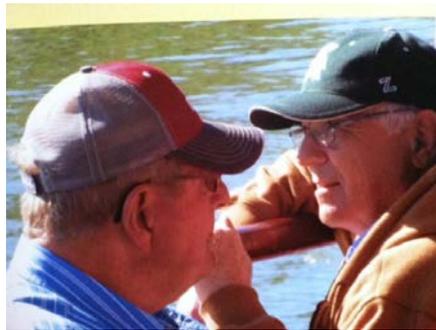
Western Lake Erie Basin Farmers Innovate to Protect Water Quality

by Amy Gilhouse, MAEAP Technician - Lenawee CD

Today's Farmers face challenges in regard to land development, dwindling labor force, changing weather and rising costs of production. Yet in the face of adversities of every kind, it has been farmers who have continued to feed America and nations around the globe. And now farmers in the Western Lake Erie Basin are coming together to discuss, problem solve and create solutions to the issues of harmful algae blooms in Lake Erie.

There is no question that municipal and industrial waste contribute to water quality issues and that all sectors of communities need to come together to protect water resources. It is however with pride and commitment to protecting our water resources that farmers in the Western Lake Erie Watershed are putting their heads together to implement more conservation practice implementation.

On December 10, farmers and partners of agriculture met at the Old Mill in Dundee to share ideas and partner to address water quality issues. Joe Nester of Nester Ag Inc. presented the benefits of gypsum to soil health. Jeff Reutter, Ph.D, Special Advisor Ohio Sea



L-R, Don Sahloff of Monroe County and Dean Taylor of Lenawee County, at a Sandpiper Boat cruise on the Maumee River.

Grant College Program, F.T. Stone Lab center for Lake Erie Research Consortium presented research findings from 2015 and shared that we still have much to learn from the science that is coming in.

Several of the farmers who attended remarked that they valued the opportunity to network with other farmers to discuss possible solutions to water quality issues. Two farmers expressed interest in finding funding to support phosphorus injection equipment that they had found while doing research on keeping phosphorus in the soil. It is likely that the innovative thinking of a group of farmers will do much to enhance water resource management.

Funding is available in 2016 for farmers, landowners of farmed land and partners of agriculture to participate in experiential opportunities to learn more about current and emerging issues of water quality. For more information about the

Farmers Advisory Committee contact Amy Gilhouse at the Lenawee Conservation District (517) 263-7400 or visit <http://riverraisin.org/FarmersAdvisoryCommittee.aspx>. For more information about MAEAP visit www.maeap.org

District Conservationist Seth Earl Wins State Farm Bureau Discussion Meet

Seth Earl, NRCS district conservatonist in Monroe County, was this year's winner of the Michgian Farm Bureau Discussion Meet. The event was held during the organization's annual meeting in Grand Rapids on Dec. 2.

"Farm Bureau discussion meets test young farmers to a unique public speaking challenge; participants are rewarded for their knowledge of current agricultural issues, their cooperative demeanor and the tact and civility of their delivery."

After a dozen regional contests across the state,

31 participants competed in two opening rounds. Round three saw the field cut to 16 semifinalists, then four finalists faced off to determine the statewide winner.

As the state winner, Earl advances to compete in the national-level Young Farmer and Rancher Discussion Meet at the American Farm Bureau Federation 97th Convention and Annual Meeting, Jan. 9-13, 2016 in Orlando, Fla.



Seth Earl
photo provided by
Michigan Farm Bureau

Van Buren CD Honored as MAEAP Grant Host of the Year

The Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development honored the Van Buren Conservation District as its MAEAP Grant Host of the Year award.

The award was presented during the Michigan Association of Conservation Districts Annual Convention in Bellaire in late October. The Award was given for the continued support for the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) and the programs push to help Michigan farmers become, and continue to be, better stewards of the land.

The Van Buren Conservation District has been a partner and grant host for MAEAP since the program began in 2000. Van Buren Conservation District is one the top districts in the state, ranked in the top five counties for MAEAP Farm Verifications, they also holds many educational



Joe Kelpinski, MAEAP program manager for the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (far left) presented the MAEAP Grant Host of the Year Award to the Van Buren Conservation District during the MACD Annual Convention.

field days for farmers, recycling events for homeowners, river cleanups, plant and tree sales.

Beginning Farmer Webinar Series

Michigan State University Extension is conducting a live webinar series tailored to beginning farmers.



Beginning producers and others with basic information needs are invited to participate in a series of 23 online

programs addressing crop and livestock production, pest management and marketing on weekday evenings Jan. 18 through April 27, 2016.

Participants will learn the basic principles of a variety of production and marketing systems, and have an opportunity through live, on-line chat to ask questions of MSU agriculture experts. The live webinar presentations will begin at 7 p.m. EST and run no later than 9 p.m. EST.

A \$10 fee is charged for each webinar in the series, or \$115 for the full series (50% savings!). The webinars will be delivered on the ZOOM Webinar platform. A high-speed internet connection is required, and connection information will be emailed after registration.

For more information go to www.msue.anr.msu.edu.

Winter Forestry Workshops

The Forestry Assistance Program for the Leelanau, Benzie and Grand Traverse conservation districts is organizing a series of workshops for private forest owners.

The first workshop, Timber and Taxes, is scheduled for 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. at the Grand Traverse Conservation District in Traverse City. The same session will be repeated from 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. The cost to attend this session is \$15 by January 25 or \$20 at the door.

A second workshop will be held from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Feb. 25, at the Leelanau County Government Building Community Room in Suttons Bay. The topic of this workshop is Planting Trees and Shrubs, Reforestation, Wildlife Habitat and Aesthetics. There is no cost to attend this workshop.

Two more forestry workshops will be held in March. For more information contact District Forester Kama Ross at 231/256-9783 or by e-mail at kama.ross@macd.org. Information is also available online at natureiscalling.org.

Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events

January

- 12-13 Northwest Michigan Orchard & Vineyard Show, Grand Traverse Resort - Acme, for more information call 231/946-1510 or e-mail nwmihort@msu.edu
- 12 Pest and Crop Management Update Meeting, 9 a.m. to 4:10 p.m., Shifter's Restaurant - Alma, registration fee \$25, for more registration and to register online go to www.msue.anr.msu.edu
- 14 Pest and Crop Management Update Meeting, 9 a.m. to 4:10 p.m., Bavarian Inn Lodge - Frankenmuth, registration fee \$25, for more registration and to register online go to www.msue.anr.msu.edu
- 15 Pest and Crop Management Update Meeting, 9 a.m. to 4:10 p.m., Sanilac Career Center - Peck, registration fee \$25, for more registration and to register online go to www.msue.anr.msu.edu
- 16 Michigan Family Farm Conference, Marshall High School - Marshall, for more information go to www.miffs.org
- 27 Timber & Taxes Workshop, 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., repeated at 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m., Grand Traverse Conservation District - Traverse City, registration fee \$15 by Jan. 25 or \$20 at the door, for more information call 231/256-9783 or e-mail kama.ross@macd.org
- 29 Northern Michigan Small Farm Conference, Grand Traverse Resort -Acme, for more information go to www.smallfarmconference.org

February

- 2 Pest and Crop Management Update Meeting, 9 a.m. to 4:10 p.m., Alpena Community College - Alpena, registration fee \$25, for more registration and to register online go to www.msue.anr.msu.edu
- 2 Birds'n Brew (coffee), 9 a.m. buffet \$8.99, 9:30 a.m. program no-cost, Lake City Family Diner, RSVP by Jan. 24 at 231-839-7193

February ctd.

- 3 Pest and Crop Management Update Meeting, 9 a.m. to 4:10 p.m., Tresle Stop Restaurant - Hamilton, registration fee \$25, for more registration and to register online go to www.msue.anr.msu.edu
- 4 Pest and Crop Management Update Meeting, 9 a.m. to 4:10 p.m., Dowagiac Conservation Club - Dowagiac, registration fee \$25, for more registration and to register online go to www.msue.anr.msu.edu
- 17 Ingham Conservation District Annual Meeting, 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., Ingham County Fairgrounds Banquet Hall - Mason, \$10 fee includes dinner, for more information go to www.inghamconservation.com
- 20 Whooo's for Dinner? - Investigation Activity & Owl Prowl, 5:30 p.m., Missaukee Conservation District - Lake City, RSVP by Feb. 12 at 231/839-7193
- 25 Planting Trees and Shrubs - Reforestation, Wildlife Habitat and Aesthetics, 7 p.m. to 9 p.m., Leelanau County Government Bldg. Community Room - Suttons Bay, free of charge, for more information call 231/256-9783 or e-mail kama.ross@macd.org
- 27 Branch Conservation District Annual Meeting and Expo, Branch Area Career Center - Coldwater, for more information go to www.branchcd.org
- 27 Youth Small Game Hunt, 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., Ingham Conservation District - Mason, for more information go to www.inghamconservation.com

March

- 4 Michigan SWCS Seminar "A Matter of Balance: Systems Approaches to Managing Great Lakes Landscapes, MSU Kellogg Center - East Lansing

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