



High Tunnels Part of Genesee Local Food Boom

With some help from an NRCS initiative, the local food movement in Flint and Genesee County is having a major growth spurt. In early 2016, NRCS announced \$300,000 in funding for a local food initiative and the community responded.

The initiative provides funding for producers to purchase high tunnels for extended season vegetable production along with funds for partners to provide outreach and training. Over the past two years, NRCS has funded 37 high tunnels using funds from the initiative, said District Conservationist Joe Woodruff. In February, the Genesee Conservation District began offering workshops on high tunnel production featuring speakers from the University of Michigan and Michigan State University.

A number of small landowners have been enticed into joining the local food movement, said Woodruff. Included are Margaret and Randy Horton who hosted a high tunnel building workshop on their farm near Swartz Creek. The Hortons have owned their farm since 1978 but only began raising food in 2011 after they retired. The Hortons received financial assistance from NRCS to purchase the hoop house that was going up. They have another hoop house that was purchased through the Hoophouses for Health program administered by the Michigan Farmers Market Association.

Mrs. Horton took master gardening classes but didn't have time to put her knowledge to use until she retired. She really got hooked on gardening after participating in a Women in Agriculture project sponsored by Michigan Food and Farming Systems. The project included operating a community garden,



Randy and Margaret Horton hosted a high tunnel construction workshop on their farm near Swartz Creek. The couple began raising vegetables, beef and other food during their retirement.

including an NRCS financed hoop house, near Genesys Hospital in Grand Blanc.

"I saw the hoop house and thought I have to get one of those," said Horton. She started growing in her first hoop house over the winter and now has it planted with summer vegetables like tomatoes, kale and cucumbers. Her second high tunnel was being built as part of the workshop in August. So far she is enjoying raising food.

"I can't wait to get up in the morning, so awesome. This is our retirement."

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State Conservationist's Message

Hurricane Harvey is most devastating natural disaster to strike the United States in many years. Counties in Texas experience rainfall of over 15 inches in a 24 hour timespan and over 25 inches in 72 hours. Residents of these counties, including farmers and rancher will be living with the effects of this storm for a long time.

The destruction left behind by the storm prompted Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue to make a direct appeal to USDA employees to contribute to organizations providing assistance to Hurricane Harvey victims. Ordinarily, federal employees can only be solicited to make contributions to the Combined Federal Campaign. The destruction of Harvey prompted the Office of Personnel Management to allow agencies to direct employees to charities that are assisting with the Harvey relief efforts. The charities included in a memo from Secretary Perdue include:

- Texas Farm Bureau Hurricane [Harvey Relief Fund](#)
- [State of Texas Agriculture Relief Fund](#)
- [San Antonio Food Bank](#)
- [Central Texas Food Bank](#)
- [The Salvation Army](#)

With Hurricane Irma expected to bring more devastation to coastal communities and beyond, the USDA will update this solicitation to include additional agencies if needed. USDA agencies

like NRCS will also be working directly with customers in the hurricane areas to restore farmland and other agricultural land impacted by the storm.



State Conservationist
Garry Lee

Another way for USDA employees to help people in need is through the annual Feds Feed Families food drive. The food drive has been held for

several years now and was created to provide food to children who may depend on meals at school during the rest of the year. With the new school year starting the food drive is wrapped up but it will return in 2018.



Some of the 81 pounds of food collected this year by the USDA Service Center in Grand Rapids for the FFF campaign.

This summer NRCS-Michigan hosted seven college students participating in the USDA

Pathways internship program. Internships are the ideal way for students to experience what a career in conservation is like. With our state's diverse agriculture and our experienced staff I believe NRCS-Michigan provides these students the best possible experience. I greatly appreciate the NRCS employees who mentored these students and made their summer experience possible.



Flint Partners Improving Access to Healthy Food

Whether you're growing, selling or buying locally-grown food in Flint or the surrounding area there is a place to go for support and advice.

The Genesee Conservation District has played a role, especially since opening an office in downtown Flint in 2014. Last year, the district received a \$300,000 grant from NRCS including targeted EQIP funds for high tunnels along with funding to provide training for growers to use them. This year the district received an Urban Agriculture Conservation Grant from the National Association of Conservation Districts. The district will use the second grant to hire an additional staff member to provide training to urban growers on outdoor production.

"We should have the whole gambit covered now for a year, it's very exciting," said District Administrator Angela Warren.

The conservation district began its high tunnel education program with stakeholder meetings to determine the needs of local growers. The first workshop was held in February with over 40 people attending, said Conservation Coordinator Anna Williams. Local partners helped get the word out



Flint Fresh staff member Alexi Allen

while others like MSU Extension and the University of Michigan provided experts to lead the workshops. The workshops covered topics like soil health and organic production within a high tunnel production system.

Targeted EQIP funding for high tunnels in Flint and surrounding Genesee County resulted in 37 contracts over the past two years, said NRCS District Conservationist Joe Woodruff. This funding along

with the efforts of local organizations like Edible Flint, the YMCA of Greater Flint, MSU Extension, the Flint Farmers Market and the Community Foundation of Greater Flint have increased the supply of locally-grown food.

"No matter where you live in Flint you have access to the highest quality, healthy food you can get," said Pam Bailey, board president of Flint Fresh.

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Part of the produce from her first hoop house goes to the Flint Farmers Market where it is distributed to vulnerable families. These sales go toward repaying the cost of her first hoop house. She also sells produce at a weekly farmers market in Grand Blanc. Perhaps most importantly to Horton, she has plenty of fresh produce for her own family. Horton hired a nutritionist to teach her how to better utilize what she grows.

"My inspiration is to eat healthy and teach my grandchildren about raising food," Horton said. "I really want to learn how to eat better."

The Hortons' food production doesn't stop with vegetables. Randy Horton has his own small-scale beef operation. He grazes about 14 Angus beef cattle using a rotational grazing system. There is a waiting list of customers wanting to buy the natural, grass-fed beef, he said. Horton also raises honey bees and harvests maple syrup.

"What else am I going to do? I'm never bored, I have something to do every day."

The Hortons are not only providing fresh healthy food to their community they are also nearly self-sufficient for their own food, said Margaret.

"I only go to the grocery store for toilet paper now."



Attendees at a high tunnel workshop organized by the Genesee Conservation District build a high tunnel on the Randy and Margaret Horton farm near Swartz Creek.

Michigan Wetland Mitigation Bank is Open for Business

The Michigan Agricultural Mitigation Bank is open for business and wants to help agricultural producers with “swamp buster” wetland violations get back into compliance. NRCS awarded \$7 million in funding to create wetland mitigation banks in 10 states including Michigan.

“We’re really interested in talking to farmers who are out of compliance,” said Wetlands Mitigation Banking Program Manager Steve Shine of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

The mitigation bank is a partnership between the Michigan Municipal Wetland Alliance and the MDNR. The wetland mitigation bank allows farmers with wetland compliance violations to purchase credits from MAMB that will restore their eligibility for USDA programs. In return, MAMB will restore wetlands either on public lands, or on private land formerly enrolled in the USDA Conservation Reserve Program.

Wetland mitigation banks are intended for producers who are in violation of the USDA’s wetland compliance regulations because they have converted wetlands into agricultural production. To regain compliance for USDA programs, a producer with a violation must either restore the converted wetland or mitigate the violation by restoring a wetland at another location or through purchasing credits from a wetland mitigation bank.

Farmers who want to purchase wetland mitigation

credits will first need to develop a wetland mitigation plan, said Shine. Among other things, the plan will tell the producer how many mitigation credits to buy. The mitigation bank cannot provide a mitigation plan but can help farmers find assistance, he said.

Wetland mitigation credits are used to restore or preserve wetlands in the same region as the wetland that was converted for agricultural use. The MAMB sent out about 100 letters to landowners with wetlands that were enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program, said Shine. Shine hopes that some of these producers will be willing to sell permanent wetland easements to the mitigation bank. Landowners who sell permanent easements retain ownership, including control of access to the property and recreational use of the land. The mitigation bank is responsible for monitoring the easement to make sure it is maintained as a wetland.

The mitigation bank needs to know in what areas wetland mitigation credits are needed before purchasing easements however. So far, only a few farmers have contacted MAMB with interest in buying mitigation credits, Shine said. He wants farmers with wetland compliance violations to know that the mitigation bank is open.

Landowners interested in either enrolling land into permanent wetland easements or purchasing wetland mitigation credits, should go the MAMB website at www.michiganwetlands.com for more information.

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Flint Partners Improving Access to Healthy Food

This was not always the case. There are no large grocery stores in the city and many of the smaller stores do not carry a lot of fresh healthy food, said Bailey. Flint Fresh was created in August of 2016 as a partnership with a goal of making healthy food available to all Flint residents. It will soon become a separate non-profit organization, she said.

The first project of Flint Fresh was a mobile market with three trucks selling healthy food at locations throughout the city. The mobile markets offered fresh produce as well as items like bread and eggs. The trucks accept payment using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education to make sure the food is affordable for all residents. After the mobile markets the Flint Fresh Veggie Box program was started.

Veggie boxes can be delivered anywhere in the city, said Alexi Allen of Flint Fresh. People can sign up for either a \$15 or \$30 box which includes delivery. The veggie box program distributes produce from about 22 local growers, she said.

The latest project of Flint Fresh is a food hub, a food aggregation space where local growers can take their produce for distribution to larger scale buyers like restaurants, schools, hospitals and other institutions. In addition to distributing, the food hub will also wash and sort the produce before it’s sold.

The lack of access to healthy food has been a problem in Flint for over a decade. Partners have come together to make a lot of progress in a short period of time to solve the problem locally. “It is very much a whole community effort,” said Bailey.

Pathways Students Experience a Michigan Summer

NRCS hosted seven Pathways students over the summer, providing them the experience of both working and living in Michigan.

The seven interns worked in six different field offices learning what a career with NRCS entails. All of them are college students pursuing degrees in agriculture or conservation. Here is a brief introduction to each of them along with their impressions of their summer:

Kiamata Dukes

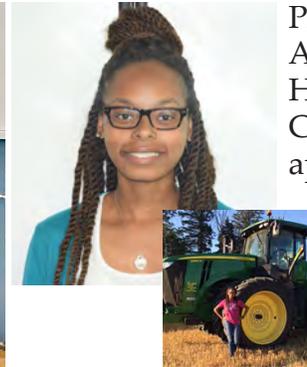
Dukes enjoyed visiting pollinator sites and fruit farms while working at the NRCS office in Paw Paw. She is senior at Fort Valley State University and is majoring in Agriculture Economics. In 2016, Dukes interned at the NRCS office in St. Johns. She rode her first horse this summer, a Morgan belonging to District Conservationist Jeff Douglas.



Kiamata Dukes
Paw Paw



Brandon Fisher
Paw Paw



Nailah Payne West
Branch



Kwesi Huffman
Caro



Dakota Mackel
Big Rapids



David Robinson
Hastings

Brandon Fisher

A senior studying Animal Science at Alcorn State University, Fisher interned at the Paw Paw field office. He worked on a number of projects over the summer and enjoyed working on grazing plans and agrichemical handling facilities the most. Fisher also had the opportunity to visit dairy farms and learn about pollinator plantings and irrigation systems. Fisher's hometown is Jackson, Miss.

Nailah Payne

Payne is from Natchez, Miss., and is studying agriculture and science along with urban forestry at Southern University A&M College where she is a junior. She spent the summer working in

the West Branch office where she learned about soil testing as well as harvesting wheat and pickles. Outside of work she went kayaking for the first time, visited the Lake Huron shore in Tawas and traveled to Mackinaw Island.

Kwesi Huffman

From Detroit, Huffman worked closer to home than his fellow interns. He is a sophomore majoring in Plant and Soil Science at Alcorn State University. He worked in the Caro field office and appreciated going on field visits to expand his knowledge of agriculture. He also learned about the history and programs of NRCS and gained an understanding of where he wants his career to lead him.

Dakota Mackel

Mackel interned in Big Rapids and is a junior at Alcorn State University studying Agriculture Business. He gained experience communicating with farmers and landowners

and learning the steps involved in implementing a conservation practice. Mackel also helped vaccinate sheep, encountered his first draft horse and shot clay pigeons.

David Robinson

Robinson graduated from Hinds Community College and will attend Alcorn State University in the fall to study Agriculture Environmental Science. He interned at the Hastings office and enjoyed learning about soils and geologic history of Michigan. Robinson is from Vicksburg, Miss.



Ashli Holloway
Ann Arbor

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Programs for Private Woodland Owners

by Bill Cook, Michigan State University Extension

Managing a woodland results in many rewards: more money, lots of fun, stewardship satisfaction, family bonding, healthier conditions, better habitat and so on. A managed forest also adds strength to our economies and lifestyles. It's this greater social benefit package that prompts government to make some offers to woodland owners on behalf of its citizens.

Most assistance programs are funded through either the federal or state governments. To a lesser extent, and likely to be more local, are programs through forest industries, land conservancies and special interest groups and associations. All of these programs have websites filled with good information, if you know they exist.

From the State of Michigan, there are two property tax abatement programs for woodland owners interested in forest management. The Commercial Forest (CF) program replaces regular property taxes with a straight \$1.25 per acre. The Qualified Forest Property (QFP) program exempts owners from the school operating taxes levied by local taxing units.

Of course, each program has eligibility requirements, fees and protocols. After all, the government wants something in return for those tax reductions. Both programs require management plans with timber harvest schedules. For many owners, one of the most important differences is whether or not public access

is allowed. The CF program opens enrolled forest to foot access for hunting, fishing and trapping. The QFP program allows land to remain posted. That's part of the reason the tax breaks are greater for the CF lands.

The DNR's Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) helps fund forest management plans, which can be used for a variety of applications, if done appropriately.

The program maintains a list of approved plan-writers, which is also a good list for obtaining other forestry expertise.

NRCS and the Michigan Tree Farm Program are other avenues to obtain a forest management plan that will allow woodland owners to become eligible for additional funding to help implement certain management practices.

The NRCS also has a list of plan-writers, called "technical service providers" (or TSPs). Many of them are the same people that are on the DNR FSP list. For woodland owners, the NRCS manages two programs of particular interest to woodland owners: 1. Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP) and 2. Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

The Michigan Tree Farm Program (MTFP) uses a network of volunteer inspectors to help woodland owners write management plans. Forest certification is one advantage of enrollment in the MTFP. This status will help some logging contractors sell into markets that they might otherwise have less access into.

Site visits by a forester or biologist are often desirable to woodland owners. However, most professionals haven't the time to provide free services. One solution to this barrier is the Forestry Assistance Program (FAP) that's run through some of the County Conservation Districts (MACD). These FAP foresters can visit with woodland owners, on site, and discuss options and avenues for a course of action. They can help untangle what can seem to be a maze of possibilities or, perhaps, simply a foggy black box of unknowns.

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Pathways Interns

Ashli Holloway

Holloway is from Stockbridge, Ga. and will start her sophomore year at Alcorn State University where she is majoring in Animal Sciences. She worked in the Ann Arbor field office and enjoyed working on the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program and visiting the Rose Lake Plant Materials Center.

NRCS-Michigan wishes all of our Pathways interns success with their studies and their future careers.

To learn about USDA Pathways Programs visit <https://www.usda.gov/our-agency/careers/usda-pathways-programs>.

Midland CD Brings "Conservation Matters" to Local Viewers

The Midland Conservation District has brought its message to the small screen by producing its own program on Midland Community Television.

The idea came about when a customer who also volunteered at MCTV asked District Manager Karen Thurlow if she was interested in doing a show. The first episode of "Conservation Matters" was broadcast in February 2016.

"I get people who say they watched it and they've learned things," said Thurlow. "A lot of people have mentioned it."

Thurlow and NRCS District Conservationist Boyd Byelich have recorded ten episodes of "Conservation Matters." Some of topics covered include; selecting and planting trees, wildlife and pollinator habitat and invasive versus natives species. The episodes range from about 20 to 30 minutes in length.

The district produces the program at no cost but Thurlow began volunteering at MCTV as a way of paying back. After completing training she volunteered to film a number of local events including a Chinese New Years program and a performance by a children's choir from Africa.

"I've learned a lot it's kind of fun to do," said



NRCS District Conservationist Boyd Byelich and Midland Conservation District Manager Karen Thurlow record an episode of "Conservation Matters" for Midland Community Television.

Thurlow.

"Conservation Matters" has been on a short hiatus due to other work demands but Thurlow and Byelich plan to return to the studio soon.

Thurlow's future plans include filming outdoor events like the district's upcoming Fourth Grade Farm Tour. She also plans to learn how to do her own video editing.

NRCS Outreach - NRCS Outreach - NRCS Outreach - NRCS Outreach

Agro Expo - St. Johns



NRCS District Conservationist Olandous Curry talks with an attendee at the Agro Expo event in St. Johns on Aug. 15.

Center for Excellence Field Day



Zach Smith, Solomon Andrews and Jason Wheeler staffed the NRCS booth at the Center for Excellence Field Day in Lenawee County on Aug. 9.

Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events

September

- 9 Outdoor Extravaganza, registration begins at noon, YMCA Camp Timbers - West Branch, for more information go to ogemawcd.org or call 989/345-5470 ext. 5
- 13 Montcalm Conservation District/Muskegon Watershed Assembly Conservation Tour, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., leave from St. Bernadette of Lourdes' Church - Stanton, call 989/831-4606 ext. 5 to register
- 14* Invasive Species Management Course, *Thursday evenings through Oct. 19 from 6 to 8 p.m., W.K. Kellogg Bird Sanctuary - Augusta, registration required by Sept. 10, for more information call 269/908-4135 or email sarah.nelson@macd.org
- 16 Land Inheritance/Ties to the Land Workshop, Grand Traverse Conservation District Community Room - Traverse City, for more information and to register call 231/256-9783 or email kama.ross@macd.org by Sept. 11
- 19-20 Annual Well Water Testing Days, Branch Conservation District - Coldwater, call for more information and water sampling instructions at 517/278-2725 ext. 5
- 28 Cropping and Topping Field Day, starts at 4 p.m., Warren Malkin Farm - Laingsburg, RSVP by Sept. 22, call 989/224-3720 or email kelcie.sweeney@macd.org
- 29 Fresh From the Farm: The Benefits of Locally Grown Food, 10 a.m. to noon, Paris Park Fish Hatchery - Paris, for more information call the Osceola-Lake Conservation District at 231/832-2950 ext. 5 or the Mecosta Conservation District at 231/796-0909 ext. 3, RSVP by Sept. 22

October

- 12 Branch Conservation District "Land Judging Day," Shedd Farms - Tekonsha, for more information and to register, call 517/278-2725 ext. 5 or email kathy.worst@mi.nacdnet.net
- 14 Pasture Walk, 9:30 a.m. to noon, May Farm - Frankfort, RSVP to the Benzie Conservation District at 231/882-4391 or by email at benziecd@benziecd.org
- 21 Benzie & Manistee Agriculture Field Day, 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., Schoedel's Summit View Farm - Manistee, RSVP to Manistee Conservation District at 231/889-9666 x 3 or scott.hughey@mi.usda.gov
- 25 Lichen Heaven! Presentation, 6:30 to 8 p.m., Grand Traverse Conservation District Community Room - Traverse City, for more information call 231/256-9783 or email kama.ross@macd.org

November

- 1 Michigan Chapter Soil and Water Conservation Society Annual Meeting, 11 a.m. (field trip in afternoon time TBD), Shanty Creek Resort - Bellaire, for more information go to www.migswcs.org/events-and-archives/



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