



Helping People Help the Land

Conservation Notes

USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service - Michigan

September/October 2017

Great Lakes Workshops Provide Learning Experience

There's nothing like seeing it for yourself. Since 2011, groups of farmers and partners of agriculture have been going out on excursions to the Saginaw Bay, Detroit River, Lake Erie and the Maumee River to see for themselves how the health of the Great Lakes is being affected by nutrient loading.

One of the ships taking farmers out on to the Great Lakes is the Appledore IV operated by Bay Sail, an educational non-profit based in Bay City.

The idea of Bay Sail taking farmers for educational workshops was initiated by Fields to the Great Lakes Coordinator Amy Gilhouse. On Aug. 25, a group representing Michigan conservation districts and the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program saw the ship off as it left Bay City to sail to Toledo. There, farmers from Michigan, Ohio and Indiana participated in three days of Water Quality Sail Workshops.

Bay Sail's mission is to foster environmental stewardship of the Great Lakes and it takes both students and adults on educational cruises, primarily in the Saginaw Bay, said Bay Sail Education Director



Michigan conservation district and MAEAP representatives join the crew of Bay Sail's Appledore IV before it sets off for a three cruise from Bay City to Toledo.

Autumn Mitchell. This past summer, the Tuscola Conservation District took a group of 25 farmers on a Bay Sail cruise and the Huron Conservation District took 38.

The groups included both farmers that were MAEAP verified and farmers who were not. "It's a good reinforcement for people who are verified to see that conservation practices are worthwhile," said MAEAP Technician Steve Schaub. It's also a great opportunity

for farmers to learn more about Natural Resource Conservation Service programs available to assist farmers in meeting their farms stewardship goals.

In 2013, the Field to the Great Lakes Events were expanded to include a Day Conference at Ohio State University's Stone Lab in the Lake Erie Islands and a cruise on the Sandpiper Boat in the Maumee River. At Stone Lab research is being conducted on the effects of phosphorus on water quality and aquatic organisms. Participants of the day conference spend time in the lab as well as time on the water in a

- 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
Great Lakes Workshops ctd.	3
From Sod to Wetland	4
USDA Assistance to Caribbean	5
Cultural Resources Training	6
American Indian Poster	7
Cover Crop Survey	7
Event Calendar	8

State Conservationist's Message

Beginning with Hurricane Harvey in Texas a series of natural disaster have struck our country. In addition to hurricanes, devastating forest fires have affected western states, particularly in northern California.

NRCS staff from around the country have volunteered to assist local staff in assisting agricultural producers recovering from these disasters. Assistance is being provided at the producer and watershed level in these areas.

~

Closer to home, the USDA Conservation Effects Assessment Project released a [report](#) on the impact of voluntary conservation efforts in the Western Lake Erie Basin.

The report focuses on sediment and nutrients being delivered to stream and rivers in the WLEB and to Lake Erie. Relative to if no conservation practices were in place, the voluntary conservation practices in use by farmers in the basin in 2012:

- Reduce phosphorus and nitrogen lost from cultivated cropland fields by 61 and 26 percent, respectively;
- Reduce phosphorus and nitrogen deposition into ditches, channels, streams, and rivers of the lake's basin by 72 and 37 percent, respectively; and
- Reduce phosphorus and nitrogen entering Lake Erie by 41 and 17 percent, respectively.

The report shows that by adopting science-based conservation practices, farmers can reduce their share of nutrients reaching the Great Lakes.

~

Conservation Client Gateway, the online tool that allows NRCS customers to sign contracts, track payments, request assistance and do other tasks online from home is gaining traction in Michigan.

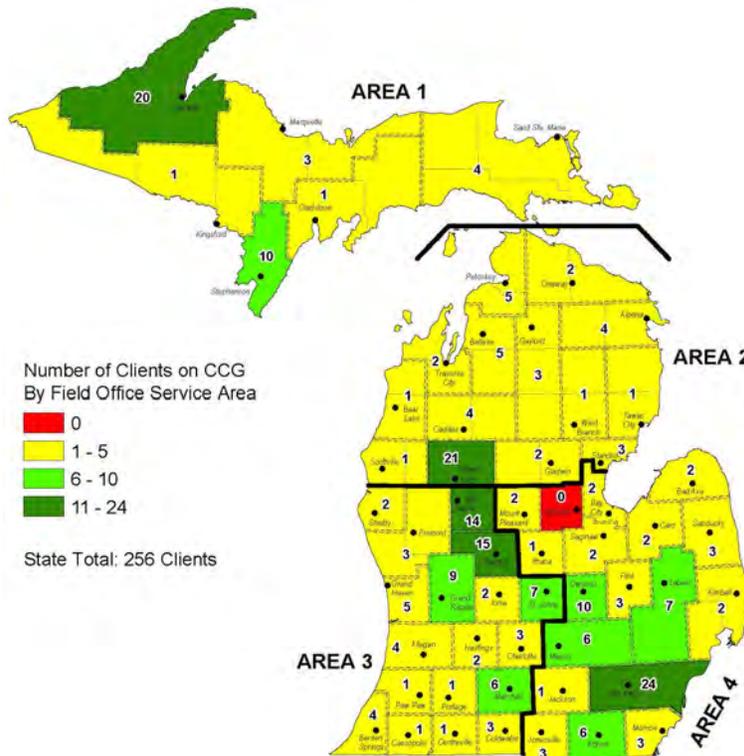


State Conservationist
Garry Lee

In fact, Michigan was one of fewer than 10 states to reach its CCG sign-up goal for 2017.

Not only is Michigan one of the leading states in signing up CCG users, we lead the country in the number of customers actually utilizing Client Gateway. Feedback from these users has been largely positive. CCG is especially useful for landowners who may reside in other states or who spend portions of the year out of state.

I encourage all NRCS customers to try out Client Gateway. Customers can sign up at home or at their local NRCS office. Guidance in accessing CCG is available [online](#) and there is also a help desk to call for assistance. Signing up for CCG doesn't mean a customer cannot still obtain assistance at their local office, it's just another means to do business with NRCS.



- continued from page 1 -

Great Lakes Workshops Provide Learning Experience

research vessel.

With the encouragement of farmers from the Western Lake Erie Basin the Appledore was brought to Lake Erie and in 2015 three sails took farmers from throughout the Western Lake Erie Basin on sails out of Monroe and later the National Museum of the Great Lakes in Toledo.

While on the sail workshops, farmers assisted in taking a number of samples for testing including water samples and sediment samples from the lake bottom. Once the samples were on board, passengers could look at macro invertebrates from the water samples under the microscope and examine larger organisms extracted from the lake bottom.

“We try to make sure we know we’re all contributing to pollution, not just farmers,” said Mitchell. “The focus is on solutions.”

Lenawee County farmer Ray Griffin got his hands dirty straining mud collected from the bottom of Lake St. Clair for insect larvae and other invertebrates. Determining the species of organisms found and the ratio of organisms is a good indicator of water quality. Griffin has valued the Great Lakes educational trips for farmers on Lake Erie and has gone as an attendee and as a presenter.

Griffin has solutions that work on his farm to reduce phosphorus from leaving his fields. Some of the practices he has implemented include cover crops, no-till and drainage water management.

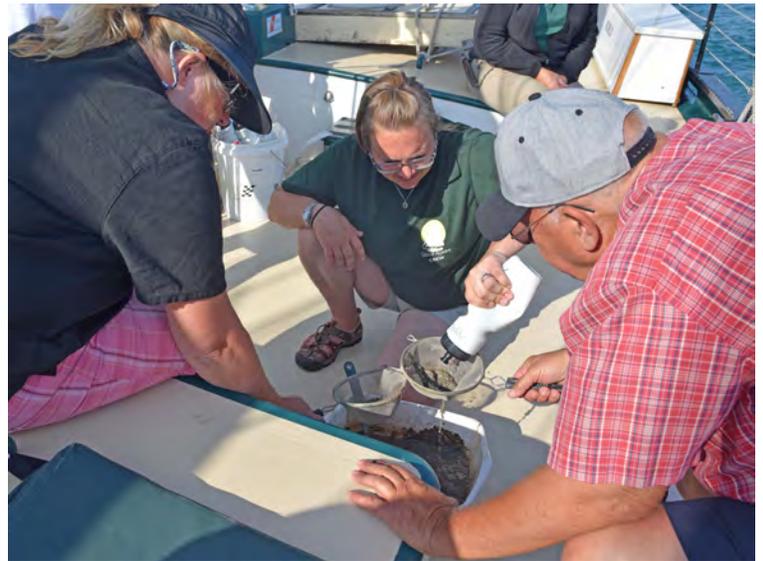
“The health of the soil and the health of the Great Lakes are all related,” said Griffin.

Some of the organizations involved in funding the events included the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Washtenaw Office of the Drain Commissioner, Green Stone Farm Credit Services, Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Crystal Flash, The Nature Conservancy, Michigan Rural Water Association, The Anderson’s, Michigan Farm Bureau, The Stewardship Network, Williams Soil and Water Conservation District, and Wood Soil and Water Conservation District.

“We really truly couldn’t have had success without the people who stepped in to help, planning

committee members, sponsors and farmers who encouraged that the events be continued all made the sails, conferences and cruises possible,” said Gilhouse.

Funding is currently being sought to continue the Field to the Great Lakes Events, for more information about the events contact Amy Gilhouse at (517) 673-1655 or amy.gilhouse@macd.org.



(above) Fields to the Great Lakes Coordinator Amy Gilhouse (far left) looks on as Bay Sail Education Director Autumn Mitchell and Monroe County farmer Ray Griffin examine sediment from the bottom of Lake St. Clair. (below) The Appledore IV nears the Detroit lake front at the end of the second of its three-day cruise from Bay City to Toledo.



Sod Farm Retires to Become Wetlands Easement

The 285 acres of Eaton County land enrolled in a wetland easement is covered in shoulder-high grasses and various tree and shrub saplings, but Jim Mc Cleod can still see the bustling sod farm it once was.

“In sod production you’re in those fields every day,” says Mc Cleod.

After taking over the sod farm from his father in 1977, Mc Cleod had as many as 10 employees and a \$300,000-automated sod harvester. Semi-trucks would haul loads of sod to new housing developments. The farm grew a shade-loving fescue that made good lawns up north, said Mc Cleod. Business was good but slowed dramatically after the housing crash in 2008. He decided to retire from sod farming in 2009.

“It wasn’t fun anymore and I wasn’t making any money, said Mc Cleod. My help was making more money than I was making.”

Mc Cleod’s son wasn’t interested in sod farming and the son of another sod farmer decided not to buy the farm. Since the farm is muck ground, he knew it could be easily converted back into wetlands. He’d looked into enrolling some of his land in a wetland mitigation or easement program in the past but never followed through. With few other options, Mc Cleod contacted NRCS about enrolling his land in what was then the Wetland Reserve Program.

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, the successor to WRP, purchases long-term and permanent easements of farm land that was formerly wetland. The program also covers the cost of restoring the land to wetland condition. After the landowner sells the easement, he or she still owns and controls access to the land and can use it for recreational purposes like hiking, hunting and fishing. Under the easement restrictions the property must remain a wetland even if the land is sold.

- continued on page 5-

Eaton County landowner Jim Mc Cleod stands on a culvert where a drainage ditch once crossed his property. (top right) A water level control weir was installed on another drain to help restore the land back into a wetland. (middle right) A variety of plants, including native milkweed, have established themselves on the property providing excellent wildlife habitat. (bottom right)



USDA Sends Team to Help Impacted Communities in Caribbean

A team of U.S. Department of Agriculture employees is aiding recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands following hurricanes Irma and Maria. Staff members with NRCS and other USDA agencies are assessing damage and providing information to rural communities and agricultural producers on assistance opportunities through USDA.

“When it comes to natural resources, USDA is here to help people first and deal with paperwork second,” said NRCS Acting Chief Leonard Jordan. “USDA offers a variety of programs that can help communities rebuild vital infrastructure and help producers rebuild their lives.”

This team enables USDA to have representatives at agriculture-related regional meetings as well as other local meetings and to respond to inquiries from local officials and producers.

Sixteen NRCS employees from seven state offices, national headquarters and soil survey offices are supporting USDA’s staff on the islands, working closely with local officials to provide information on USDA programs, such as the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program. This program can

help communities restore damaged and destroyed infrastructure. Through the program, NRCS works with local government entities in impacted areas to remove debris, stabilize streambanks and fix water control structures, among other practices.



NRCS staff are coordinating with local state partners to complete damage assessments in preparation for sponsor assistance requests. Requests for assistance must be made within 60 days of the storm event.

Additionally, USDA has set up a 24-hour bilingual hotline for producers to call for information on programs. The hotline has directed producers to USDA programs and other resources available.

“Bottom line, we’re here to help,” Jordan said. “USDA’s staff of experts across the nation are ready to help you and your community recover from the storm.”

NRCS recommends community leaders and producers interested in assistance to visit their local USDA service center or call the recovery hotline at 787-303-0341.

- continued from page 4 -

NRCS Fit Bit™ Challenge

Cold temperatures are here and the snow is not far behind. Sure, there are other legitimate reasons of why we don’t have the motivation or the time to keep an active routine during this time of the year.

As a way to keep active and motivated, a group of NRCS employees who have Fitbit (fitness tracker) are doing weekly challenges. The challenges is a way to helps us to think of small changes during the day and the week, for example: parking the car far away from the entrance, taking the stairs instead of the elevator and/or go for a walk during the lunch break.

Please, feel free to join us! Please, contact Linda Ortiz (linda.ortiz@mi.usda.gov) for more details.



Wetland Easement

Restoration of Mc Cleod’s land included abandoning the county drain that ran across the property, breaking drainage tiles and installing several ditch plugs along with a water level control weir. Over 116,000 seedlings and 32,000 plugs including aquatic plants and trees such as white pine were planted. Neighbors have reported to Mc Cleod of seeing pheasants, deer, turkeys and a ground nesting owl. In addition to providing wildlife habitat, the land will also help recharge ground water and improve the quality of water that leaves the property.

It was a difficult decision to see the farm his grandfather started reverted back to wetlands but it was the best alternative at the time, said Mc Cleod. One drawback from enrolling the land as a conservation easement is having to continue paying property taxes, he said. Still, he concedes that converting the land back to wetlands was a good idea.

NRCS Field Staff Play Archeologist

Michigan NRCS employees are getting a look into the world of archeology as part of cultural resource training events being held across the state.

Cultural resource reviews are a legally-required part of the planning process whenever federal funds are used for projects that could affect archeological sites. Four of the five cultural training events planned for 2017 and 2018 and led by NRCS State Archeologist Duane Quates are now completed. Each training event includes 12 hours of classroom instruction and eight hours in the field.

Each training event has included a visit to a local museum, included in the classroom instruction, and a visit to a nearby site of archeological interest. Archeological sites visited so far include the Norton Mounds near Grand Rapids, the Engler Farmstead near Mt. Pleasant, a Paleo Indian site near Teal Lake in Negaunee and the Greensky site near Petoskey.

NRCS staff learned about early Michigan history as part of the training. For example the Norton Mounds site, which is owned by the City of Grand Rapids, dates to the Middle Woodlands period in North America, between 1,500 and 2,300 years ago. The 11 mounds are classified as Hopewell Mounds of which they are the best preserved of their type in North America, said Quates. The mounds stand anywhere from 30 feet to 1 feet tall.

During the field training session, attendees conducted both surface and subsurface surveys for artifacts. Artifacts usually include remnants of stone tools used by Michigan's earliest residents or rocks used in fire pits. At the Mount Pleasant training, attendees found two "true" arrow heads, Quates said. True arrow heads are small in size compared to larger arrow heads which were actually used on spears or other implements, he said.

-continued on page 7 -

NRCS Area 3 staff conduct a surface survey near the Norton Mounds archeological site near Grand Rapids. (top right) Tuscola County District Conservationist Carol Schadd holds an arrow head she found during a field training session near Mt. Pleasant. (middle right) Area 3 staff gather for a photo during their cultural resource field training at Norton Mounds. (bottom right)



NRCS Unveils 2017 American Indian/Alaska Native Poster

A painting by a Florida artist was selected to appear on the NRCS 2017 American Indian/Alaska Native Heritage Month poster.

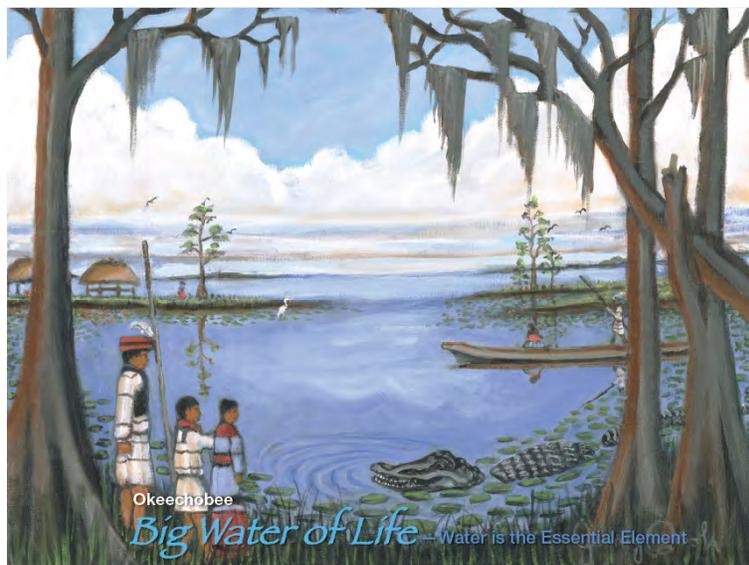
Each year NRCS distributes a commemorative poster featuring the work of artists from throughout the United States. This year, a painting titled “Big Water of Life,” by Jimmy John Osceola, a Seminole Indian from Florida was selected.

The painting illustrates the theme of this year’s poster which is “Water is the Essential Element.” The poster includes this quote from Osceola.

“As in the beginning of our being as Seminoles, water was essential for our survival for food, shelter, clothing, and travel. Today water still is and always will be essential for the survival of mankind.”

Osceola’s paintings are a window into the Seminole way of life and a reflection of the pride and respect he has for the land and the people.

American Indian/Alaska Native Heritage Month is commemorated in November.



A painting by Florida artist John Osceola is featured on the NRCS 2017 American Indian/Alaska Native Heritage Month poster. Osceola’s painting is titled “Big Water of Life.”

-continued from page 6 -

Cultural Resources Training

Landowners are often anxious about the cultural review process for fear that they may lose control of their land if artifacts are found. The government has never used eminent domain for an archeological site anywhere in the country, ever, said Quates. When a project site is determined to have archeological significance, it’s typically easy to move construction a short distance to alleviate the issue.

“If we do it right, we’ll never impact or affect a cultural resource,” said Quates.

The final cultural resource training is planned for Lansing with a visit to the Michigan History Museum and a site visit to a burial mound near Lyons.



Survey: Cover Crops Boost Yields

Following the use of cover crops, farmers reported increased yields of corn, soybeans and wheat, according to an annual cover crop survey.

The [fifth annual cover crop survey](#) by the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program and the Conservation Technology Information Center draws on the insight of 2,102 farmers—88 percent of whom reported using cover crops and 12 percent who identified themselves as non-users—from across the U.S.

Modest but statistically significant yield gains were seen once again in corn (2.3 bushels per acre, or 1.3 percent) and soybeans (2.1 bushels, or 3.8 percent) following cover crops. For the first time, the SARE/CTIC survey was able to gather enough data to analyze yield differences in wheat (an increase of 1.9 bushels per acre, or 2.8 percent).

Soil health was noted by 86% of the respondents to be a key benefit of cover crops; improving yield consistency was a second-rated reason, followed by yield advantage. More than half of the surveyed farmers believed that soil health benefits from cover crops began in the first year of use.

Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events

November

- 9 Loving our Dunes to Death? Balancing Enjoyment with Conservation, 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., Heritage Museum and Cultural Center - St. Joseph, for more information and to RSVP call 269/925-1137 ext. 1521 or email kmartin@swmpc.org

December

- 5 Meet the Buyers Workshop & Reception, Amway Grand - Grand Rapids, morning workshop and evening networking session, for more information go to www.miffs.org
- 5-7 Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Market Expo, Devos Place Conference Center - Grand Rapids, for more information to go glexpo.com
- 13 Thumb Ag Day, 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Ubly Heights Country Club - Ubly, for more information call 989/269-9949 ext. 602 or go to <http://msue.anr.msu.edu/events/>



SAVE THE DATE

SATURDAY, FEB. 3, 2018

8:00 AM - 4:30 PM

15TH ANNUAL MICHIGAN FAMILY FARMS CONFERENCE

*Cultivating a thriving food community . . .
from the soil on up!*

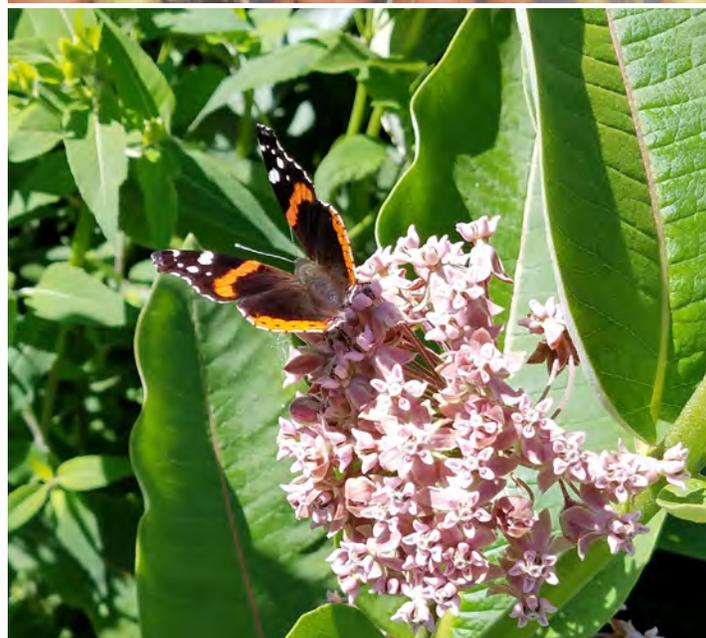


Kalamazoo Valley Community College
6767 W O Ave, Kalamazoo, MI 49009

This is a forum for beginning, small-scale and culturally diverse farmers to network, learn and build sustainable family farms while connecting with other farmers from Michigan

Keynote to be delivered by Dr. Monica M. White

info@miffs.org



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.