



Conservation Notes

USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service - Michigan

January/February 2016

What Makes Land a Wetland?

Wetland regulations may seem complicated, but determining whether a piece of land is a wetland is a very straightforward, science-based process.

There are three indicators used to determine the presence of wetlands in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers process of delineation which is utilized by NRCS and other governmental agencies. The three indicators include hydrophytic vegetation, hydrology and hydric soils. Hydrophytic vegetation is plants that thrive in a wetland environment. Hydrology is evidence of saturation in the root zone for two consecutive weeks during the growing season. Hydric soils are those that are formed under water saturated conditions.

“People think a wetland has to have open water and cattails, but it does not,” said NRCS State Soil Scientist Marty Rosek. “A wetland can be full of trees and be dry much of the year.”

Ever since the 1985 Farm Bill was introduced, Wetland Conservation Compliance (and Highly Erodible Land Conservation) has been a requirement for participating in USDA programs. Responsibility for technical determinations and delineations of wetlands following the Swampbuster provisions was assigned to NRCS. A wetland determination stays with the land when it changes ownership and restricts its use by the owner or renter if they choose to participate in USDA programs.

The preliminary wetland determination is made off-site using a variety of overlapping data sets including aerial photos, soil maps, topographical maps and others. If there is a disagreement



NRCS State Biologist Daniel Zay (left) and NRCS State Soil Scientist Marty Rosek conduct a third-level wetland review.

with the technical wetland determination, appeal rights are available. “Nobody wants a wetland,” said Rosek. Out of 5,000 initial wetland determinations, about 800 landowners will ask for a reconsideration.

The reconsideration of a wetland determination is done on site, usually by an area conservationist. Another appeal option through the Farm Service

- 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 |
| New RCPP Partner | 4 |
| District Spring Tree Sales | 5 |
| Forest Density | 6 |
| Black History Program | 8 |
| Annie’s Project | 9 |
| NRCS Updates | 9 |
| Event Calendar | 10 |

State Conservationist's Message

One way to make healthy, nutritious food more available for Michigan residents is to produce more of it ourselves. Financial assistance for local producers to purchase high tunnels is helping them produce more food and making it available nearly year-round.

Financial assistance for the purchase of high tunnels, also called hoop houses, was made available through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program beginning in 2010. High tunnels are framed structures covered in plastic that allow producers to extend the growing season. With high tunnels, producers are able to produce two crops in one year and make fresh vegetables available nearly year-round. These producers typically sell their produce to local consumers; through Community Supported Agriculture shares, farmers markets, roadside stands and through local retailers.

High tunnels can have the most impact in areas where fresh, affordable produce is not readily available. In Michigan these include rural areas not served by large grocers and urban areas experiencing de-population and the move of large retailers to outlying areas.

Michigan began targeting high tunnel funding to Detroit and Wayne County in 2013. As the population of Detroit has decreased over the past decades large grocers have moved away, making fresh produce inconvenient to buy, expensive, and not always of good quality. At the same time small producers have sprung up in the city to fill the

void by utilizing vacant land. NRCS has provided financial assistance to both private individuals and non-profit organizations, to purchase high tunnels. NRCS also provided technical assistance through a partnership with the Southeast Michigan



State Conservationist
Garry Lee

Resource Conservation and Development Council. SEMRCD coordinated workshops on all aspects of high tunnel production, from building the tunnels to marketing.

On Feb. 8, NRCS along with Congressman Dan Kildee, announced a high tunnel initiative for Flint and Genesee County patterned after our successful effort in Detroit. This year NRCS will provide \$300,000 in technical and financial assistance to expand high tunnel food production in Genesee County. Again, NRCS is partnering with local organizations including the Genesee Conservation District, the Genesee County Land Bank, Edible Flint and others to promote the practice and provide training to local growers.

High tunnels are making more locally-produced food available throughout Michigan. NRCS has provided funding for more than 500 high tunnels in 75 counties.

Thank you to our producers and partners for making this possible.



Congressman Dan Kildee, State Conservationist Garry Lee, (above) and Genesee Conservation District Chair Nancy Szikszay (below) at the Flint-Genesee County high tunnel announcement.



- continued from page 1 -

What Makes Land a Wetland?

Agency County Committee, third-level wetland reconsiderations, requires an on-site investigation by state level specialists. Rosek and NRCS State Biologist Dan Zay are the team doing this work. On-site wetland determinations must be conducted during the growing season in order to determine if hydrophytic vegetation is present. Soil borings are also required so the ground cannot be frozen.

Although a wetland determination can be a hindrance to some farming operations, wetlands themselves are an indication of a healthy ecosystem, said Zay. Wetlands allow rain and snowmelt to infiltrate the ground and recharge aquifers. Flooding was less prevalent before wetlands were converted for agriculture and other types of development. Streams flowed throughout the year as water slowly seeped from wetlands. Today, water is often shunted off the land as quickly as possible through field tiles and city storm water systems. This leads to more flooding events and depleted aquifers.

When doing a third-level reconsideration, Zay is responsible primarily for identifying any hydrophytic vegetation as he works alongside a soil scientist. He looks for a dominance of wetland plants which can be a different suite of plants depending on the season. Wetland plants are adapted to a lack of oxygen in the root zone. They can survive in upland areas more successfully than upland plants can survive in a wetland. In determining the boundary between a wetland and upland, Zay looks for where upland plants drop out of the plant community.

If a wetland has been drained but not converted to agricultural land, there may be upland plants in the herb spectrum with wetland plants dominating the tree canopy. Some wetland-adapted trees include swamp white oaks, willows, cottonwood and green ash. Even if a wetland has been tiled and drained it is still classified as a wetland if it meets the three wetland criteria.

As a soil scientist, Rosek concentrates on

- continued on page 4 -

The Three Indicators of Wetlands

Hydrophytic Vegetation



The blue flag iris (above) is plant species that thrives in wetland conditions.

Hydrology



Waterlines on trees are an indicator of prolonged periods of standing water.

Hydric Soils



The presence of hydric soils (formed in water saturated soils) indicate a wetland environment.

NW Michigan Project Selected for USDA Partnership Program

A proposal to improve aquatic habitat and purchase conservation easements in northwest Michigan was one of the 84 conservation projects selected for funding by NRCS. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that the USDA and partners across the nation together will direct up to \$720 million towards the new conservation projects.

The announced projects make up the second round of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program created by the 2014 Farm Bill. The program is a partner-driven, locally-led approach to conservation that offers USDA's Natural Resources

Conservation Service new opportunities to harness innovation, welcome new conservation partners, and demonstrate the value of private lands conservation.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program projects are selected on a competitive basis, and local private partners must be able to at least match the USDA commitment. The Tribal Stream and Michigan Fruitbelt Collaborative is



a partnership led by the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians. NRCS will provide \$7.9 million in financial and technical assistance to the project.

The Tribal Stream and Michigan Fruitbelt

Collaborative partners will address aquatic organism passage, aquatic habitat and water quality resource concerns at 66 stream crossings and dams throughout northwest Lower Michigan. To ensure conservation investments are long lasting and not undermined by drastic changes in watershed hydrology, land

conservancies will preserve nearly 3,000 acres of unique, specialty-crop agricultural land with permanent conservation easements.

Five Michigan projects, including two multi-state projects, were selected for funding in the first selection of Regional Conservation Partnership Program projects. These projects were selected in 2015 and included over \$82 million in financial and technical assistance from NRCS.

- continued from page 3 -

What Makes Land a Wetland?

determining the presence of hydrology and hydric soils on the site. Hydrology is evidence that the area is saturated or covered with water for extended periods. Evidence for this can include water-lined trees, a high water table and water saturated soil.

Hydric soils are formed under periods of saturation and can be easily identified. One type of hydric soil is marl, which forms when calcium carbonate precipitates out from the upper soils and forms a concentrated layer of lime. Highly organic soils, like muck soils are also an indicator that the soil was formed under water. Highly organic soils are not formed in dry conditions because organic matter quickly oxidizes when exposed to air.

NRCS is not a regulatory agency, and a wetland determination only applies to participation in USDA programs. NRCS is prohibited from reporting wetland compliance issues to other agencies like the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers or the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.

In the past, wetland areas were often utilized for livestock in the drier months while easily drained wetlands were converted to agricultural use long before Swampbuster legislation was passed. With farms utilizing larger equipment, farmers may find having a wetland disruptive to their operations. The consolation is that wetlands play an important environmental role in water quality and quantity.

Conservation District Tree Sales

Tree sales, typically held in the spring and fall, are an important source of revenue for local conservation districts. They also provide landowners a source of reasonably priced, healthy trees, shrubs and other conservation plants. If your conservation district is not listed below go to www.macd.org to find contact information for you district.

| Conservation District | Dates and Times | Location |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Allegan | Ordering deadline March 25 April 23 | Allegan Tech Center - Allegan |
| Branch | Ordering deadline March 24 April 15, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. April 16, 8 a.m. to noon | Branch County Fairgrounds - Coldwater |
| Chippewa, Luce, Mackinac | Ordering deadline - April 1 April 29, 12 p.m. to 6 p.m. April 30, 10 a.m. to noon April 30, 10 a.m. to noon | Kaines Ice Rink - Sault Ste. Marie Kaines Ice Rink - Sault Ste. Marie TBD - Newberry |
| Clare | Ordering Deadline - April 7 April 15, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. April 16, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. | Clare County Sheriff Dept. Garage - Harrison |
| Crawford-Roscommon | Ordering deadline - March 15 April 22, noon to 4 p.m. April 23, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. | Michigan Fire Training Grounds - Roscommon |
| Grand Traverse | Ordering deadline March 31 April 22, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. April 23, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. | Boardman River Nature Ctr. - Traverse City |
| Ingham | Mail in deadline April 8 Online order deadline April 13 April 22 & 23 | Ingham Conservation District - Mason |
| Jackson | Ordering deadline - March 22 April 15, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. April 16, 9 a.m. to noon | Jackson County Airport - Jackson |
| Marquette | Ordering Deadline April 1 April 29 & 30 | Marquette Conservation District - Marquette |
| Missaukee | Ordering deadline April 15 April 29, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. April 30, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. | Missaukee County Road Commission - Lake City |
| Otsego | April 29 & 30, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. | 720 S. Otsego Ave - Gaylord |



How Dense Can You Get?

by Bill Cook, Michigan State University Extension

Forest density is a critical measure that strongly affects forest health, plant composition, stand structure, and ecological function. Forest density is easily measured and can be managed.

In many forest stands, the amount of light is the most limiting ecological factor, especially for regenerating trees and other plants. The forest canopy determines how much light reaches each tree and how much light eventually reaches the forest floor. Canopy characteristics are often highly variable. Forest management manipulates canopy characteristics and light penetration, among other things, to work towards specific goals.

Light is required to drive the process of photosynthesis. Photosynthesis produces sugar, which stores chemical energy, converted from light energy. The energy is consumed in respiration so that plants and animals can live, grow, and reproduce. These chemical reactions fuel life as we know it.

All plants, including trees, have different requirements for light. Some species prefer full sunlight. Other species do better in partial shade. Strategies to obtain light vary greatly. Next time that you're in a forest, take some time to see which tree species are regenerating, if any. Also, pay attention to light hitting the forest floor, and then monitor a few of those places during the year to see what happens.

Spring flora run most of their life cycle in full sunlight between the winter thaw and leaf-out among the trees. After leaf-out, the shorter plants must adapt to what's left, go dormant for years, or die-out. This long-term struggle for light in the forest influences key ecological processes such as succession and disturbance.

Tree rings offer insight to past light conditions. Wide rings suggest more light and more growth. Narrowing rings show less growth, and possibly less light. The declining growth causes tree stress and increased vulnerability to insects and

pathogens.

Foresters express forest stocking with a measure called "basal area" or BA. By definition, BA is the cross-sectional area of all trees at 4.5 feet from the ground (often trees at least five inches in diameter), on a given acre. BA is measured in the number of square feet per acre (there are metric equivalents, of course). Optimal BA for a forest will depend on the type of forest, but typically ranges run from 70 to 150 square feet per acre for forest types in the upper Great Lakes.

Because forests can be rather complex, different stand density guidelines exist for a variety of conditions, such as species mix, age, average diameter, etc. Northern hardwoods (sugar maple, basswood, yellow birch, hemlock) require the highest level of skill and experience to manage. Northern hardwoods are the most common forest types in the northwoods and are growing more common as the decades roll by.

Alternatively, aspen types are comparatively simple. In fact, aspen types regenerate from a "catastrophic disturbance" such as fire, blowdown, or clearcutting. Aspen trees are quite intolerant of shade. Seldom is thinning cost-effective in aspen types. The life strategies of aspen and northern hardwoods are polar opposites.

Red pine offers another set of peculiarities in response to light. Whether naturally regenerated or planted, red pine "close the canopy" at some point in time. Growth begins to slow. Lower branches die and eventually fall-off. Once trees near their genetic height maximum, shrinking crowns present a problem. While healthy red pine stands respond well to thinning, the trick with is to thin these stands before the crown size is reduced too far.

Should the average tree crown occupy less than 10-15 percent of the tree height, those trees will not be able to grow large crowns. Thinning trees with small crowns will not cause new branches to grow below the existing crown because red pine doesn't

- continued on page 7



Rose Lake Earth Team Volunteer Recognized

The Rose Lake Plant Materials Center recognized Tom Topham for his 250 hours of service as a volunteer to the center.

Topham began volunteering at Rose Lake in 2013 after moving to the Lansing area from Kalamazoo County. Since that time he has worked about 12 hours a week at the center on a variety of tasks associated with plant field trials and maintenance work.

“Work at the PMC reconnects Tom with his childhood in Michigan’s Thumb where he worked on his grandparents’ farm,” said PMC Manager John Durling. Topham worked as Kalamazoo County’s Director of Education for Employment before retiring and moving to be near his grandchildren.

Thank you Tom!

For more information about the NRCS Earth Team Program go to www.mi.nrcs.usda.gov.



PMC Manager John Durling (left) and Technician Sergio Perez (middle) present a certificate of appreciation and an NRCS vest to Earth Team Volunteer Tom Topham.

- continued from page 5 -

How Dense Can You Get?

have the ability to do that, unlike a maple or an oak. Thinning may simply result in more wind breakage.

Northern white-cedar stands can grow to remarkably high stand densities, in excess of 300 square feet per acre. A sapling cedar under these very shady conditions may barely stay alive. Yet, if released to increased light, that sapling will begin to grow aggressively. Cedar is among the minority of tree species with this sort of light elasticity.

Trees, however, while dominant, are not the only plants in the forest. Other plants must be adapted to the light conditions that a forest canopy provides. There is more light under a mature aspen stand than under a mature cedar stand. Understory plants will vary accordingly.

As openings occur, either natural or through management, the understory responds predictably. The mix of ground plants, shrubs, young trees, and mature trees is called stand structure. Stand structure, among other characteristics, can be manipulated by controlling light levels through forest management.

One of the few downsides of managing light is the potential invasion of exotic plant species. Shrubs such as buckthorn, autumn olive, Japanese barberry, and honeysuckles occupy understories more quickly than most native species. Some exotic

ground plants, such as garlic mustard, may not even need a lot of light, but will gradually take over a shady forest floor. These exotic invaders reduce native diversity, erode habitat quality, degrade ecological services, and significantly alter the course of natural succession. Native plants are more difficult to grow.

Letting forests “go wild” will seldom result in positive outcomes. Nearly all of our forests have been heavily impacted by past practices. In some ways they are not “natural”. Failure to manage light levels, and other ecological parameters, inevitably leads to serious declines in forest vigor and resilience.

Forest protection, restoration, and the provision of products and services are compromised by benign neglect. Visual quality, while important, is a particularly poor measure of ecological integrity. Forest owners have a wonderful opportunity to improve the conditions of their woodlands. Management of these valuable forest resources is also a great way to bring a family together, have fun, and provide meaningful experiences. Forest owners have a special opportunity to “share the light.”

Bill Cook is an MSU Extension forester providing educational programming for the Upper Peninsula. His office is located at the MSU Forest Biomass Innovation Center near Escanaba.

USDA Employees Learn About Michigan Underground Railroad

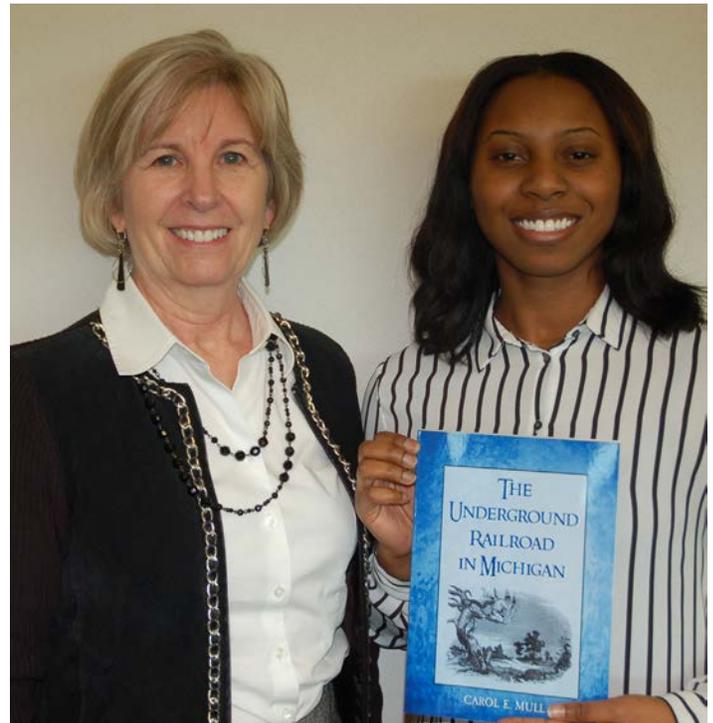
With its status as a free state, and having a border with a country where slavery was outlawed in 1833, Michigan was a refuge and a passage way for many African Americans fleeing slavery in the 19th century.

Author and historian Carol Mull talked about the Underground Railroad and African Americans in Michigan before the Emancipation Proclamation, at the USDA Black History Month Program. The event, organized by a committee of employees representing assorted USDA agencies, was held in East Lansing on Feb. 23.

Many escaped slaves and freemen and women settled in Michigan, particularly western Michigan, in addition to passing through to Canada, said Mull. Many Michigan communities were welcoming to African Americans. In the 1840s slave catchers became more aggressive, emboldened by federal laws, and they traveled to Michigan in search of fugitive slaves. This led many African Americans to leave Michigan for Canada.

On several occasions communities stood up to the slave catchers and helped escaped slaves flee to Canada. In 1847, slave catchers captured members of the Crosswhite family in Marshall and attempted to return them to Kentucky. Residents resisted their removal and eventually helped them to escape to Canada. The Kentucky slave owner later attempted to sue members of the community for damages. Earlier, in 1833, another Kentucky slaveholder attempted to capture his escaped slaves this time in Detroit. The capture of escaped slaves Thornton and Ruthie Blackburn led to what became known as the Blackburn riots. Ruthie Thornton was rescued from jail and later a Black Detroiters freed Thornton Blackburn as his captors attempted to put him on a boat back to Kentucky.

Michigan had an active anti-slavery movement which established the Michigan Antislavery Society which formed in 1836. The Society established two antislavery newspapers, the American Freeman in 1839 and later the Signal



Author and historian Carol Mull (above left) was the featured speaker at the USDA Black History Month Event in East Lansing. NRCS employee and Black History Month Committee member Tamarra Roseburgh holds a copy of Mull's book "The Underground Railroad in Michigan."

of Liberty in 1841. Many of members of the anti-slavery movement were also active in the Underground Railroad, helping escaped slaves reach the freedom of Canada.

Mull described Laura Haviland as the Harriet Tubman of Michigan. The Lenawee County farm of Haviland and her husband Charles was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Haviland began assisting fugitive slaves in the 1830s and continued after her husband's death. In 1846 she began traveling to the south to help slaves escape to freedom.

USDA employees hold a Black History Month Program each February. This year's event also included a lunch and learn session with retired State Soil Scientist Will Bowman. Bowman, a member of the Lansing Area African American Genealogical Society, talked and answered questions about researching family histories.

Annie's Project Helps Women Excel on the Farm

by Katelyn Thompson, Michigan State University Extension

Michigan women play a significant role in the successful operation of many of Michigan's farms. Regardless of whether a woman is employed in an off-farm job her role in the family farm is essential to the operation.

Empowering women in agriculture is the mission of Annie's Project, a program born in Illinois and currently taught in 33 states, including Michigan. Annie's Project is a six-week educational program committed to strengthening women's roles in the modern farm enterprise and is supported and conducted by Michigan State University Extension along with community partners.

Annie's Project teaches five areas of agricultural risk management including financial, human resources, legal, marketing, and production. Core values of Annie's Project are providing a safe harbor learning environment, connection with other women and professionals, shared intelligence with each other and instructors, and discovering new understandings. The program is a great opportunity for women to come away



with not only useful new skills and tools but also beneficial relationship networks that foster shared learning.

Annie's Project provides a positive and engaging learning environment for participants to make most of the program and leave with implementable information for their farm. Women's role in agriculture is a growing trend statewide and nationally. According to U.S. Department of Agriculture there are 24,000 women farmers in Michigan with 7,409 of those women being the principal operators of farms.

Women are an essential part of agriculture and Annie's Project aims to ensure that women are provided the tools and information needed to mitigate risk on their farms.

Currently, Michigan State University Extension has an Annie's Project scheduled in Adrian, Mich. to start on Aug. 2, 2016. To learn more about Annie's Project or to find out how an Annie's Project can be held in your area contact Katelyn Thompson at thomp737@msu.edu.

This article was published by Michigan State University Extension. For more information, visit www.msue.msu.edu.

NRCS-Michigan Staffing Update

New Hires

Ignacio Avila, Agriculture Engineer, State Office

Shawn Kelly, Soil Conservation Technician, Hastings

Retirements

Marilyn Shy, Area Biologist, Marquette

Departures

Melissa Barley, Farm Bill Specialist, Traverse City

Joey Davis, Soil Conservationist, Big Rapids

Joseph Goubert, Farm Bill Specialist, Kimball

Silvester Perez, Farm Bill Specialist, Mt. Pleasant

Jessica Kinch, Farm Bill Specialist, Portage

Transfers

Jorge DeJesus Rosado, Soil Conservationist, Paw Paw (from Portage)

Upcoming Application Cut-off Dates

March 15 - RCPP Wetland Easements, Western Lake Erie Basin and St. Joseph River Watershed

March 18 - National Water Quality Initiative, designated watersheds in Clinton and Calhoun counties

March 18 - Flint/Genesee County High Tunnel Initiative

March 18 - RCPP Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Western Lake Erie Basin and St. Joseph River Watershed

Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events

March

- 4 Michigan SWCS Seminar "A Matter of Balance: Systems Approaches to Managing Great Lakes Landscapes, MSU Kellogg Center - East Lansing
- 5 Tree Care Workshop, 9:30 a.m. to noon, Calder's Dairy - Carleton, for more information and to register call 734/241-7755
- 10 Harmful Algal Blooms: A Public Safety Forum, 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., Monroe City Hall - Monroe, for more information contact the Monroe Conservation District at catherine.acerboni@mi.nacdn.net
- 10 Planting Trees and Shrubs Workshop, 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., Benzonia Township Hall - Benzonia, for more information or to register, contact Kama Ross, District Forester, at 231/256-9783, or kama.ross@macd.org
- 11 Great Lakes Leadership Academy, application deadline, for more information go to www.glla.msu.edu
- 12 Healthy Forests - Caring for our Trees, 9 a.m. to noon, Grand Traverse Conservation District - Traverse City, for more information or to register, \$10 registration fee by March 10, \$15 at door, contact Kama Ross, District Forester at 231/256-9783, or kama.ross@macd.org
- 15 Wildlife Workshop "Planning for your Woodlots," 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., USDA Service Center - Charlotte, for more information and to RSVP call 517/543-1512 ext. 5
- 17 Oak Wilt Management Meeting, 6 p.m. to 7 p.m., Jay's Sporting Goods - Gaylord, for more information and to RSVP call 989/732-4021 or brittany.mauricette@macd.org
- 19 Mid-Michigan Farm & Garden Show, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Gladwin Community Arena - Gladwin, for more information go to www.farmandgardenshow.com

March ctd.

- 19 Highland Ag Conference, 9:15 a.m. to 4 p.m., Wexford-Missaukee Career Technical Center - Cadillac, registration deadline is **March 15**, for more information and to register online go to www.missaukeecd.org
- 29 Van Buren Conservation District Farming for the Future Conference, 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., Van Buren Conference Center - Lawrence, free to attend and lunch included, for more information and to register call 269/657-4030 ext. 5 or go to vanburencd.org

April

- 9 Fruit Tree & Grafting Workshop, 10 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., Ausable River Center - Roscommon, \$20 for one session or \$30 for two, for more information and to RSVP call 989/732-4021 or brittany.mauricette@macd.org
- 19 Jackson County Rural Education Day, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., Jackson County Fairgrounds - Jackson
- 23 Earth Day Celebration in the Park, 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., Sparks Foundation County Park - Jackson
- 30 Making & Using Maps - Missaukee Conservation District, 10 a.m. to noon, Missaukee County Road Commission - Lake City, for more information contact John Webb at 231-775-7681 ext. 3
- 30 Ingham Conservation Stream Team Monitoring, Ingham Conservation District - Mason, for more information call 517/676-2290

May

- 6 Soil & Water Conservation Society Highway Cleanup, meet at noon, NRCS State Office - East Lansing



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