



Helping People Help the Land

# Conservation Notes

USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service - Michigan



July - August 2013

## Bay County Farmers Warming to Cover Crops

Bay County farmers are responding to a conservation district campaign to reduce the amount of phosphorus entering the Saginaw Bay. The Bay Conservation District is offering financial assistance to farmers for a variety of conservation practices targeted to water quality.

“We’re trying to get them to do something new and hopefully they’ll like it,” said district employee Kevin Wilson.

The conservation district is providing financial assistance for conservation buffers, cover crops, tillage and residue management, wind barriers and other practices on a first-come-first-served basis. The funding was made available through an Environmental Protection Agency grant administered by the Bay County Drain Commissioner. The conservation district is promoting conservation on farmland while other agencies focus on other water quality issues like septic systems.

The Kawkawlin Watershed includes a large portion of Bay County and small portions of Gladwin, Midland and Saginaw counties. Most of the farmland and all of the landowner applications have come from Bay County, said Wilson. Wilson is leading the sign-up which started at the end of June.

Cover crops are the most popular practice with



*Bay County Conservation District Chair John Burk is a long-time believer in cover crops.*

the district receiving about 20 applications including over 3,000 acres of cover crops. Financial assistance for cover crops through the Kawkawlin initiative is \$25 or \$35 an acre depending on what type of cover crop is planted. Financial assistance is for only one year and the rates are lower than what is offered by NRCS through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Farmers are not allowed to receive assistance from both programs during the same

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State Conservationist’s Message	Page 2
Featured Volunteer	4
Oak Wilt	5
State Conservation Engineer	6
Soil Health Resources	6
Dry Kiln Workshops	7
Barry/Eaton Fall Tour	7
Event Calendar	8

# State Conservationist's Message

A farmer in Lenawee County purchased some new land that was used as pasture for many years. When he planted the new land to corn, it produced substantially higher yields than the neighboring fields he already farmed. He reasoned that his newly cropped land had better soil quality from all the years it was left undisturbed as pasture.

Leaving crop land vegetated and disturbing the soil as little as possible are major components of the NRCS Soil Health campaign. Producers from around the country maintained or increased their yields, reduced their overhead costs, and saved time by following the tenets of soil health:

1. Use plant diversity to increase diversity in the soil. (Use cover crops and crop rotation.)
2. Manage soils more by disturbing them less. (Do not disturb.)
3. Keep plants growing throughout the year to feed the soil. (Utilize cover crops.)
4. Keep the soil covered as much as possible. (Keep it covered.)

The Soil Health Theater has videos featuring farmers who are using soil health management systems to make their farms more profitable, productive and sustainable. You can find the Soil Health Theater and more information about soil health by visiting the NRCS website at [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov) and clicking on the Soil Health icon.

NRCS is promoting soil health because it is the key to our future food supply and healthy soils are good for the environment. Keeping crop land covered with vegetation as long as possible and using less tillage protects surface water and provides habitat for wildlife.



NRCS Michigan State Conservationist Garry Lee



As the farmers featured in the NRCS Profiles in Soil Health will tell you, converting to a soil health management system is not an easy transition. They will also tell you that improving soil health will keep your land productive for you and future farmers.

Congratulations to recently retired Lenawee County District Conservationist Tom VanWagner. Tom received **Michigan Farm Bureau's 2013 Ecology Champion Award**.

"Tom VanWagner earned the honor based on decades of work helping area farmers minimize the impact of their operations on the land that makes their livelihood possible."

-continued from page 1-

## Bay County Farmers Take Advantage of Conservation Funding

year. However, farmers are more likely to get funded through the district than EQIP.

Fields that are fall tilled without a cover crop can resemble a desert. Uncovered fields are prone to wind erosion in the flat terrain that surrounds much of the Saginaw Bay. Studies have shown that the silt blown from farm fields contain a high level of phosphorus which is eventually deposited in surface water and leads to excessive



*A rye cover crop prior to spring planting.*

algae growth. Decaying algae reduce the amount of oxygen in the water harming aquatic life.

About half of the applications for cover crops have come from pickle growers, said Wilson. Pickles are harvested earlier in the year so cover crops are a good way to protect the soil while the fields would be fallow. Other farmers are planning to plant a radish cover crop after the wheat harvest on fields that will be planted to sugar beets.

“This effort is a baby step to getting guys introduced to cover crops,” said Wilson.

One Bay County farmer who did not need an introduction to cover crops is John Burk. Burk, who serves as chair of the conservation district, is a long-time believer in cover crops. Burk said he has been “messing around” with cover

crops for about 10 years. For several years he has been planting a rye cover after sugar beets and soybeans and a radish cover crop after wheat.

Burk has won soybean and sugar beet yield awards using a cover crop system. He believes cover crops make his soil healthier.

There are more earthworms in the soil since he started using cover crops and water infiltrates the soil faster. He also thinks that his rye cover is helping to control harmful nematodes.

“The ground’s a lot healthier, you can see that,” said Burk.

There are challenges to using cover crops, Burk admits. Planting through a cover crop can be difficult with some older equipment. Some farmers don’t have the equipment to manage cover crops. Fields with cover crops may also not look as clean at planting as others.

“Picture perfect fields don’t put money in your pocket,” Burk added.

Producers cannot receive payments through EQIP and the Kawkawlin initiative for the same acres of cover crops in a given year; however, producers are eligible for EQIP assistance for the same land in subsequent years. Cover crops will help control erosion immediately but it may take several years to see marked improvement in soil quality.



For information about the Kawkawlin River Watershed Initiative, contact the Bay Conservation District at 989/684-1040 or e-mail at [bayscd@sbcglobal.net](mailto:bayscd@sbcglobal.net).

Applications are still being accepted for conservation financial assistance.

## Earth Team Provides Valuable Experience for Volunteer

University of Michigan student Carissa Harcz is putting her education to use as an Earth Team volunteer in Tuscola County. Harcz became an Earth Team volunteer in May at the suggestion of her friend Caitlain Thompson who works as an NRCS soil conservationist in Bad Axe.

"I think I've learned a lot about conservation of farmland and soils. I can't see it not helping me," said Harcz.

Harcz works about 20 hours a week at the NRCS field office in Caro on a variety of tasks. She had worked over 200 hours by mid-August and planned to volunteer until she starts her final semester of school in September. In December she plans to graduate with majors in Environmental Science and Planning and Energy and Sustainable Systems. After first pursuing a career in law, Harcz is now hoping to pursue a career in conservation.

"I want to help the environment and people also," said Harcz.

Serving as an Earth Team volunteer provided her with valuable work experience. She worked in the field assisting with Conservation Reserve Program status reviews, measuring crop residue from no-till fields, collecting data from water table monitors for a potential manure storage facility and visiting different sites where landowners wanted to control excess rainwater through the use of erosion control structures or grassed waterways.

Harcz also utilized the Geographic Information Systems skills she learned at school. She used ArcGIS to create maps for FSA compliance reviews. The work required using 35mm archived aerial photo slides to ensure that no forests or wetlands had been converted to cropland. She also used soil maps to determine if any highly erodible land was pertinent to the location. Another summer project was finishing a reorganization of Wetland and HEL determinations by township and range. She also performed general office duties like data entry



*Carissa Harcz (above left) became an Earth Team volunteer at the suggestion of her friend Caitlain Thompson. Thompson works as a soil conservationist in Bad Axe.*

and answering phones.

Serving as an Earth Team volunteer provided Harcz the opportunity to utilize the skills she learned in college in a work environment and to learn what it is like to work for NRCS. When she finishes college, Harcz will consider working for NRCS as a soil conservationist or hydrologist.



Earth Team volunteers are valuable assets to NRCS and local conservation.

We would like to regularly feature Earth Team volunteers and the work they are doing in *Conservation Notes*. If you know an Earth Team volunteer who should be featured please contact State Earth Team Coordinator Teresa Moore at [teresa.moore@mi.usda.gov](mailto:teresa.moore@mi.usda.gov).

## In the Aftermath of Oak Wilt

by Bill Cook, MSU Extension

So, you've had your land treated to control oak wilt or else the disease has swept through your forest already. Lots of trees have been cut or have died. Now what do you do? Will the oak come back? Do you want oak back?

The first thing is to figure out what you want the forest to look like several decades down the road. For many, the immediate thought is reforestation; planting, if necessary. However, the newly open condition of your woodland might have some non-forest opportunities, too. Open savannahs, wooded barrens, and semi-open brushlands are among some of the rarer habitats in the Lake States. They just might make some good management goals.

You might want to engage conversations with several natural resource folks, such as foresters, biologists, and conservationists. Do some homework. Once you've identified a few desirable future conditions, look into the soil types on your property. Sandier soils will have fewer options than loamy soils. It's a lot easier to work with nature than against nature. Performing an inventory of what's on the land will help modify your desired future condition.

Spend some time wandering across the property looking for natural tree regeneration, especially saplings that are over five or six feet tall, maybe some oaks. This might be a good time to bone-up on your tree identification skills. Ideally, several hundred saplings per acre are needed for a fully-stocked condition that will produce a closed canopy forest at maturity.

Many regions of the Lakes States will lack this sort of natural regeneration for a variety of reasons. If you want to see a closed canopy forest in the future, you'll need to consider planting.

If you decide to plant trees, oaks would not be out of the question. The fungus requires live tissue to survive. Once successfully treated, oak wilt disease is absent from the site. Although, future re-infection is always possible. Decades will pass

before planted oaks will grow large enough for roots from different trees to graft with each other. Grafted roots allow oak wilt disease to quickly spread throughout a mature oak stand. White oak species will pose less risk than red oak species.

A mix of species is almost always the better bet these days. Increasing stand diversity and maintaining good vigor are the best ways to hedge against future pests, effects of climate change, and disturbance events. Of course, planted trees, especially hardwoods, will need protection from deer in most areas. Red oaks, when planted in a mix of species, should be kept at least 75 feet apart from each other. This distance is far enough to allow oaks to reach sawtimber size with a minimal chance of root grafts forming.

If you decide to tackle a planting operation, be certain to plan accordingly. Considerable quantities of effort are required both before and after the actual planting in order to obtain good tree survival rates. Effective site preparation and competition control are essential.

Watch for encroachment by invasive shrubs, especially buckthorns, Autumn olive, and honeysuckles. These species are particularly adept at overtaking areas opened up to sunlight. Managing for one of the lightly forested habitats may be a constant battle to keep these shrubs under control. They can also out-compete planted trees.

So, what should you do? Given the natural constraints of your property, that depends much upon your wishes and how much time and money you're willing to invest. Owning land and managing natural resources can be a lifetime's worth of effort and gratification.

*Bill Cook is an MSU Extension forester providing educational programming for the Upper Peninsula. He can be reached at [cookwi@msu.edu](mailto:cookwi@msu.edu) or 906-786-1575.*

## Woodford Joins NRCS-Michigan

State Conservation Engineer Rick Woodford brings both NRCS and private sector experience with him to Michigan. The Ohio native began his new position on Aug. 12 after nine years as a principal partner at Civil Engineering Services, Inc. in Naperville, Ill.



*Rick Woodford*

Woodford grew up in Akron, Ohio although he finished his last two years of high school in Brazil where his father worked for Firestone. He earned his engineering degree at Akron University and began his NRCS career in 1981 as a co-op student. He met his wife Margie while working as area engineer in Finley, Ohio.

Woodford's NRCS career took him from Ohio to the Soil Mechanics Laboratory in Lincoln,

Neb. While in Lincoln he earned his Master of Science in Civil Engineering with specialization in Geotechnical engineering at the University of Nebraska. He left Nebraska to work on the design staff at the NRCS state office in Iowa. Dam designs were a big part of his job in Iowa.

For the next 18 years Woodford worked for three different companies on the same block in Naperville. From 1995 to 2000 he worked for NRCS focusing on community development projects in the Chicago area. He left NRCS to join a private engineering firm with an office on the same block. Three years later Woodford helped start Civil Engineering Services, Inc.

Rick and Margie have two grown daughters, Lindsey 36 and Katy 32, who both live in the Chicago area. They also have an eighteen-month-old grandson, Carter. Outside of work Woodford enjoys golf and gardening and is a Blackhawks and Ohio State fan.

## Soil Health Resources Available

NRCS is continuously developing new resources to support the agency's Soil Health campaign. Many of these resources are available online by following the Soil Health link on the [NRCS-Michigan home page](#).

Profiles in Soil Health are a recent addition to the campaign. Profiles is a collection of videos of landowners who are working to improve soil health through their farming operations. The videos document how farmers are increasing yields and reducing erosion by adhering to the tenets of soil health. These tenets include: Keep it covered (use cover crops after harvest), Do not disturb (utilize conservation tillage) and Feed your soil (by using a crop rotation with cover crops).

The Soil Health Theater on the NRCS website includes Profiles in Soil Health as well as the Soil



Health Lessons in a Minute videos with Ray "The Soil Guy" Archuleta.

NRCS has also developed six Soil Health fact sheets. The fact sheets can be downloaded online. (NRCS and CD employees can find the fact sheets on the NRCS-MI SharePoint site.) An 11 by 17-inch Soil Health poster can also be downloaded and printed. Video and audio public service announcement are also available as well as photos and graphics to promote soil health.

Custom displays are available to promote Soil Health at public events. Contact the NRCS distribution warehouse for more information. Displays should be reserved as far in advance as possible to assure availability.

## Dry Kiln Workshops Planned

Three September workshops on portable wood-drying kiln technology will be held across Michigan. The workshops are hosted by the Southeast Michigan Resource Conservation and Development Council in their effort to maximize the value of the state's urban and forest trees.

The one-day workshops will be held from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. in East Lansing, Niles, and Grayling. The target audience is participants in NRCS forestry cost-share programs. The primary objectives of the workshop is to promote value-added uses for removed trees, and to demonstrate how drying wood adds both economic value and sanitation.

The workshop topics include; Basics of Forest Management, Highest and Best Wood Utilization, Building and Using a Portable Dry Kiln, Kiln Drying 101 and NRCS Forestry Cost-Share Programs. The workshop concludes with a demonstration of a portable dry kiln and saw mill equipment. Presenters include experts from the academic, private and non-profit sectors including Jessica Simons from SEM RC&D and NRCS State Forester Andy Hendriksen.

For more information about the workshop contact the SEM RC&D by phone at 517/851-2372 or e-mail: [jessica.simons@semircd.org](mailto:jessica.simons@semircd.org).

## Barry/Eaton Farm Tour



Cover crops and hops production are the focus of a Sept. 10 farm tour planned by the Barry and Eaton conservation districts.

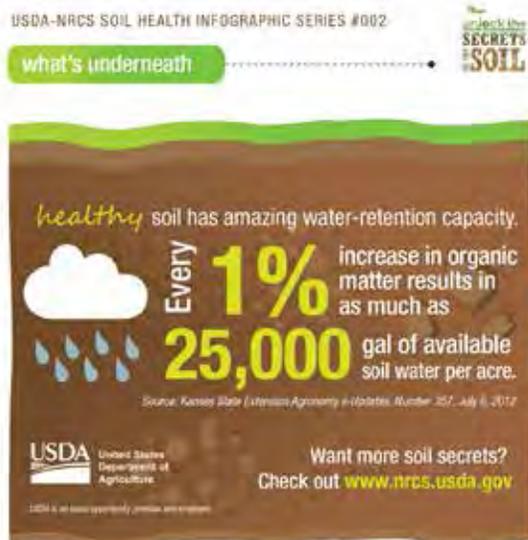
The bus tour includes morning and afternoon sessions with lunch provided. Anyone interesting in attending the tour must contact the Eaton Conservation District by Sept. 6. The cost to attend is \$10 which includes lunch.

In the morning the tour includes stops in the Vermontville area featuring innovative uses of cover crops. At one of the stops, cover crops are utilized for livestock forage.

The afternoon features a visit to Hop Head Farms near Hickory Corners. Attendees will tour the farm's hop yard and processing facility during harvest. Hop Head Farms began growing different varieties of hops in 2007 in an effort to produce Michigan-grown hops for the state's craft brewers. The farm produced its first crop in 2012.

The tour will also feature informational presentations from MSU Extension and NRCS. The tour is a Michigan Agriculture and Environmental Assurance Program phase 1 event and 3 RUP credits are available for certified pesticide applicators who attend the event.

Those interested in participating in the tour should contact the Eaton Conservation District (517) 543-5848 ext. 5 no later than September 6 to register.



## Conservation Notes - July/August 2013

### Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events

#### September

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|----|---|----|---|
| 6  | Portable Dry Kiln Workshop, full day - lunch provided, MSU - East Lansing, for more information call 517/851-2372 or e-mail: <a href="mailto:jessica.simons@semircd.org">jessica.simons@semircd.org</a>   | 21 | Breakfast on the Farm, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Ferry Farms - Litchfield, go to <a href="http://www.breakfastonthefarm.com">www.breakfastonthefarm.com</a> for more information including ticket locations                   |
| 7  | Breakfast on the Farm, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Black Locust Farms - Stanton, go to <a href="http://www.breakfastonthefarm.com">www.breakfastonthefarm.com</a> for more information including ticket locations   | 21 | Jackson County Family Farmfest, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., For more info contact MSU Extension-Jackson County at 517/788-4292 or go online to: <a href="http://www.msue.msu.edu/jackson">www.msue.msu.edu/jackson</a>         |
| 9  | Shiawassee County Agricultural Tour, 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., Shiawassee County Fairgrounds - Corunna, call the Shiawassee Conservation District 989/723-8263 ext. 3 by Aug. 30 to RSVP  | 27 | AgriPalooza-4th Annual Conservation Festival, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., MSU Upper Peninsula Research and Extension Center - Chatham, for more information go to: <a href="http://www.marquettecd.org">www.marquettecd.org</a> |
| 10 | Portable Dry Kiln Workshop, full day - lunch provided, Madeline Bertrand Park - Niles, more information on page 8   | 29 | Adopt-A-Stream Fall Collection Day, Jackson County, call 517-784-2800 ext. 208 for more information or to RSVP  |
| 10 | Barry/Eaton Fall Tour, contact the Eaton Conservation District at 517/543-5848 ext. 5 by Sept. to register, more information on page 8  |    |   |
| 11 | Harvest Celebration at the Farm, Farm Research Cooperative - 14530 CR 665 Bloomingdale  |    |   |
| 14 | Grand River Clean-Up, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., meet at Consumers Energy Band Shell - Jackson, go to <a href="http://www.great-mi.org">www.great-mi.org</a> for more information  |    |   |
| 17 | Portable Dry Kiln Workshop, full day - lunch provided, Hartwick Pines Visitor Center - Grayling, for more information call 517/851-2372 or e-mail: <a href="mailto:jessica.simons@semircd.org">jessica.simons@semircd.org</a>   |    |   |
| 19 | Kent Conservation District Conservation Workshop - USDA Conservation Programs & Invasive Species Control: Autumn Olive, 2 - 4:30 p.m., Gaines Township Hall - Caledonia, For more information, or to RSVP, call the Kent Conservation District at (616) 942-4111 ext. 4 |    |   |

#### October

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 4  | Invasive Species Control Workshop, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Paris Fish Hatchery - Paris, for more information contact the Montcalm Conservation District  |
| 19 | Jackson CD Grand River Clean-Up, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., call 517-784-2800 ext. 208 for more information or to RSVP   |
| 24 | Fourth Annual Northern Great Lakes Invasive Species Conference: Pathways of Invasion - Transport, Infestation and Control, Marquette Masonic Temple - Marquette, for more information go to: <a href="http://www.marquettecd.org">www.marquettecd.org</a> |
| 29 | Natural Shoreline Educator Workshop, Masonic Center - Marquette, for more information go to: <a href="http://www.marquettecd.org">www.marquettecd.org</a>   |

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