



Helping People Help the Land

# Conservation Notes

USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service - Michigan

July/August 2019

## Cover Crops Help Make the Best of a Bad Planting Season

It's hard not to notice that 2019 wasn't a typical planting season in northern Eaton County. When driving past farm fields around Sunfield and Grand Ledge there are numerous unplanted fields, some are overgrown with weeds, others were tilled and treated with herbicides and some are planted with cover crops.

"I've been farming for 39 years and this was the worst I've ever seen by far," said Ken Merryfield about this year's planting conditions. This year was the first time Merryfield did not get all of his crops planted, he said.

Merryfield and his son Shane planted all but 500 acres of corn and beans before the rain started and prevented them from getting into their fields for 22 days. He chose to submit a crop insurance claim on his unplanted acres. "I would much rather have had a crop planted that put an insurance claim in," Merryfield said. After filing his first insurance claim for prevented planting acres, he did something else for the first time, Merryfield planted a cover crop.

We were always interested in cover crops but we never had time for it, said Shane. The Merryfields signed up for financial assistance in planting their cover crop after a disaster initiative was announced by NRCS-Michigan in July. During the second half of July, they broadcast seeded a mixture of winter wheat and clover and then incorporated it using a vertical tillage tool. It took some time for the cover crop to emerge because of dry weather but by the end of August their fields were green.

A few miles east of the Merryfields, Jeff Smith



Eaton County farmer Jeff Smith (above) holds a radish planted as part of a cover crop mixture on a field that went unplanted due to wet planting conditions.

planted about 40 acres of cover crops, also utilizing financial assistance through the NRCS disaster initiative. The land was covered in water well into June, said Smith. "There was not much of a chance of making any money by planting it, I wasn't interested in growing 150-bushel corn."

Smith had planted cover crops before but with funding provided through the disaster initiative he decided to do more. He planted a cover crop mixture including radish, oats, cover and sunflower. "It's the

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United States Department of Agriculture

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# State Conservationist's Message

The demand for conservation assistance to plant cover crops, on unplanted land due to this spring's wet conditions, was overwhelming and widespread.

When NRCS-Michigan announced the availability of funding for cover crops on unplanted crop fields on June 25, about \$4.1 million in Environmental Quality Incentives Program funding was available. This included additional EQIP funding provided by national headquarters and remaining fiscal year funds. When the sign-up concluded on July 8, over 435 applications were received, from 43 counties. Unfortunately, only about half of the applications could be funded.

NRCS-Michigan requested funding for the cover crops disaster initiative to address serious resource concerns. Unplanted fields, especially those that were tilled in the fall or spring, were highly prone to soil erosion with negative impacts on soil and water quality.

NRCS is accepting proposals for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program. Eligible partners have until Dec. 3, 2019, to submit proposals for projects that will improve the nation's water quality, combat drought, enhance soil health, support wildlife habitat and protect agricultural viability.

Eligible partners include private industry, non-

government organizations, Indian tribes, state and local governments, water districts and universities. Proposals can request between \$250,000 and \$10 million in funding. Since 2015, 10 RCPP projects have been funded in Michigan, including multi-state projects.

Some changes were made to RCPP



State Conservationist  
Garry Lee

under the 2018 Farm Bill. In previous years the program was funded through existing programs, primarily the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, RCPP now has its own program funding. The program also has fewer funding pools intended to make the application and selection process easier.

Since creation of the program was announced at an event in Michigan, RCPP has had a major impact on our state. It has helped farmers to address water quality issues in the Western Lake Erie Basin and the Saginaw Bay Watershed, helped conserve valuable agricultural land in vulnerable parts of the state, and improved forest and wetland habitat.



(above) Leaders from Michigan's USDA Farm Service Agency, NRCS and Risk Management Agency testified before a joint hearing of the Michigan House and Senate Agriculture Committees about their agencies response to wet spring conditions in the state that prevented many fields from being planted. (below) A field in Eaton County planted with cover crops utilizing NRCS disaster assistance funds.



# Revived Midland CD Purchases Historic Barn

- Midland Conservation District

After some shaky times, the Midland Conservation District and the historic Tomlinson barn, are on solid ground.

The conservation district took ownership of the Tomlinson Family barn and approximately 5 acres, which was part of the Midland County's Pinecrest Farm on Aug. 24, just over two years after Midland County Commissioners voted to have it torn down in June 2017. Like the Tomlinson barn, the Midland Conservation District was also in jeopardy in recent years. The district closed its doors in 2012 and sold its office in Sanford in 2015 to have operating money. The district re-organized and resumed operations at the USDA Service Center in Midland.

The barn and the district also have history together, said Midland Conservation District Manager Karen Thurlow. The barn, located just west of the intersection of Homer and Olson Rd. in Homer Township, west of Midland, was built in 1912 by the Edward Tomlinson family. The county purchased the barn and 160 acre farmstead in 1968 with a donation they received from Dorothy Arbury, who was the granddaughter of Herbert Henry Dow, she was part of one of Midlands Founding Families. The district leased the barn from the county for approximately 30 years and held their annual tree



The Midland Conservation District purchased the historic Tomlinson barn (above) from Midland County in August.

- photo provided by Midland Conservation District

sales and pheasant sales, along with other activities there.

When news of the county's decision to tear down the barn came out, Thurlow was determined to save it. There were other county residents who felt the same way and Thurlow began contacting township supervisors, county commissioners, local foundations and organizations to seek support for saving it. "I was the squeaky wheel," Thurlow said. No one knew we wanted to use it, so going public with my quest made it happen.

After months of negotiations, the county agreed to sell the barn to the conservation district in September of 2018. The district purchased the barn, along with 5 acres of surrounding property for about \$47,000. Two anonymous, private citizens donated \$35,000 and \$25,000, for the purchase, said Thurlow. The funds remaining after the purchase will help pay for needed renovations including a new roof and restoring electrical and water services to the building.

"I think it's a great accomplishment," Thurlow said of the district buying the building. "We saved a barn, how cool is that!"

Along with restoring the barn as the site of its tree sales, the district is interested in using the barn to host educational workshops and as a site to highlight county agricultural history. "I think that the farming history is very important to the community and those families should not go unrecognized, their stories should be told," Thurlow said. The district

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## Cover Crops

first time going all in on this kind of mix,"

said Smith, who usually plants a more basic cover crop. He sees planting a summer cover crop as an opportunity to make his land better. There are other benefits from a summer cover crop that Smith didn't expect.

"There are all these things that aren't around when you have corn and soybeans," said Smith. He is seeing more deer grazing and hawks spend more time around the property. With the radishes in his cover crop flowering, butterflies were in abundance at the end of August.

While the Merryfields and Smith would all prefer growing corn and soybeans they are happy with their decision to plant a cover crop that will control weeds, prevent erosion and improve the soil.

# Paleo-Indian Spear Point found at PMC

An archeological survey last May at the NRCS Rose Lake Plant Materials Center led to the discovery of an artifact linked to Michigan’s earliest human residents. Found was a fragment of a “fluted point,” believed to be between 10,000 and 12,000 years-old.

“It’s pretty old, everyone was pretty excited about that,” said Bill Lovis, Curator Emeritus of Anthropology at the Michigan State University Museum.

The artifact, most likely a Park Hill point, is the oldest human artifact you can find in this part of Michigan, Lovis said. At the time, about 10,000 years ago, the glaciers had only receded as far north as the Straits of Mackinaw. The people who left the point were pioneers, colonizing an inhospitable area covered by ice only a thousand years or so before, said Lovis.

The artifact was found during an NRCS cultural resources training conducted at the Plant Materials Center, located just north of East Lansing. It was spotted during a pedestrian survey by a retired state of Michigan archeologist Dean Anderson, said NRCS State Archeologist Duane Quates. The point was the oldest human artifact in any survey he’s been involved with, Quates said. Four archeologists, including two with expertise in Paleo-Indian artifacts, concluded the point was at least 10,000 years-old.

The spear point was made of Upper Mercer Chert which originates in Ohio. The people who left the point either migrated between Michigan and Ohio or traded with people from Ohio, Lovis said. Upper Mercer Chert is dark in color and very fine grained, almost like glass, and the point has distinctive fracture scars from when it was shaped.

The people who left the point were modern humans, “no less capable than we are,” said Lovis. They were hunters-gatherers, traveling between plant and animal resources in small groups of maybe 20 or 30 people. They hunted all types of game from rabbits to deer, elk or even mastodons although they were in decline at this time. Artifacts from early Native Americans have been found in other nearby areas along the Looking Glass River, Lovis said.

Since 2018, Quates has been conducting a complete archeological survey of the Rose Lake Plant

Materials Center which includes 44 acres of land leased from the State of Michigan. Every survey he has conducted at the PMC has uncovered human artifacts ranging from 1,000 to over 10,000 years in age. “It’s an interesting landscape, I enjoy going out there,” said Quates. All the artifacts found are now the property of the State of Michigan since they own the land, he said.

Quates plans to resume the archeological survey of the PMC in September, volunteers are welcome he added.



(Top) NRCS State Archeologist Duane Quates holds a spear point found at the Rose Lake Plant Materials Center. (Above) Close-up of the point which is estimated to be at least 10,000 years-old.

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## Barn

is currently collecting the histories of the county’s early farming families. Other projects the district has planned include; an interpretive trail through a wooded portion of the property, pollinator plot, native plant sales, a high tunnel, garden plots, and a place to store its Earth and Water Tunnels. These are educational tunnels we rent and take to events and schools to teach the water cycle and the “Secrets of the Soil.”

Co-locating with NRCS at the Midland Service Center has helped establish a relationship with area farmers, said Thurlow. “We have really come a long way since 2015.” The district obtained grant funding from NACD and NRCS to help with Technical Support to NRCS and in July was able to hire a second employee. With continued support, Thurlow is confident the district will be able to continue its mission of supporting resource conservation in the county.

# When Cutting Down Trees is Doing the Right Thing

by Bill Cook, MSU Extension

Managing a forest is an exercise in both personal gain and providing benefits for many others, including a raft of wildlife species. Our forests require tending in order to provide most of the goods and services that we expect.

The casual drive through the sugar maple forest was a deep, dark green, even though the day was about as clear and sunny as a day could possibly get. As a forester and wildlife biologist, I couldn't help but notice the lack of young trees, the near absence of any flora on the ground, and the excessive number of trees. And, the trees were all the same age. I could see a hundred yards with the dearth of anything growing under that heavy shade.

Then, all of a sudden, the world lightened up. The trees looked larger and there were far more birds singing for territories and mates. I could almost hear the trees sigh with relief because they were getting enough light to grow uninhibited. What we had just entered was a fresh timber sale, and a well done one at that.

The deep forest of dark hues was not a "natural" forest, at least not in the sense of what might have been found on this site, say, 200 years ago. No, this was a single-aged forest that had grown back from the clearcutting of the historic logging era, probably to support the now-extinct mill that was not too many miles away.

Sugar maple was about the only tree species, overstocked with the good, the bad, and, yes, even the ugly. Those trees were quietly moaning under stress for the lack of sunlight. Too many trees, too close together, in densities that were both unnatural and unhealthy. Some might assign high visual quality to this park-like forest, but it was an ecological mess.

Enter the foresters with paint guns. The first trees to receive paint were those not likely to live another decade or so. Next, came the crooked and diseased trees. Lastly, when necessary, additional trees were painted to bring the stand density down to a point

where the remaining trees could grow well, for at least the next 10 to 15 years. Interestingly, there were a number of older, rotted trees that were intentionally not marked. These trees were left as habitat for particular species of wildlife.

However, the job was far from completed. This winter, a logger had harvested the painted trees. Undoubtedly, the timber sale bid was competitive. Most likely, the highest bidder had been awarded the job. The foresters were kept busy by monitoring the sale. It was a large sale, many acres, with multiple sale units.



I exited the car and entered the freshly-opened forest. I needed to take a look around. This forest would be a bit warmer and drier. The snow would have melted somewhat sooner. I could find no ruts and very few dinged-up trees. In this case, the leftover tops were cut low to the ground. The logging job was excellent.

It was a pleasure to view work done by those who care about what they do.

This forest was within the Lake Superior snowbelt, so deer over-browsing in the spring was not going to be a major issue with the recruitment of seedlings into saplings. Here, the use of high, tangled tops weren't to be needed to help protect vulnerable tree regeneration from the rapacious deer.

Subsequent harvests will provide for multiple generations of new trees that would eventually replace the current single-aged second growth. Yes, this will be a very high quality stand of sawlog sugar maple in the future. Investors will be happy. Warblers will be happy. Hopefully, vacation homes won't gobble it up.

The tree spacing throughout the part of the harvested area was about right. It wasn't entirely even, as various sized gaps were left in order to encourage tree species other than sugar maple. This was a forester's explicit attempt to promote species diversity. Time will tell if enough seed source is available to take advantage of those well-intentioned

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## Farm Bill Expands Mission of Ag Mediation Program

Michigan farmers can now mediate a wide range of disputes at no cost through the Michigan Agricultural Mediation Program thanks to the 2018 Farm Bill. The bill enables the MAMP to mediate agricultural issues involving leases, farm transitions, organic certification, next-door neighbors and more.

The MAMP helps the farm community resolve disagreements without resorting to costly adversarial hearings and court proceedings. Launched in 1997, it is part of the USDA's State Certified Mediation Program, which Congress established in 1987 to help farmers and lenders face stressful economic conditions.

Before passage of the farm bill last December, the MAMP could only mediate cases involving USDA programs or loans. The MAMP still mediates those issues but now can mediate more.

For example, families passing the farm to the next generation may find mediation helpful if disagreements arise among family members. A tiff with a neighbor may best be mediated to keep the peace. Lease transactions can be mediated to keep payments manageable or the lease in force.

Farmers in Michigan and across the country face declining incomes, late plantings, and increased

stress. Unresolved conflicts can end up in court and cause farmers to miss critical planting or harvest windows, lose farm property or be denied operating loans.

"It's important to address these issues early before parties set hard and fast positions," says MAMP Director David Gruber. "Mediation provides a

confidential forum in which they can explore options that sometimes can save the farm."

Mediation enables participants to talk informally and openly about the issues. A trained, impartial mediator helps the participants build

trust, focus on the issues, and generate options. The participants, not the mediator, decide the case. If they find a solution that they both can accept and complies with the law, they sign a written binding agreement.

In recent years, 85 percent of MAMP cases have reached agreement. Even when formal agreements are not possible, participants often gain a better understanding of the issues and their options going forward.

To request free mediation or for more information, call 800/616-7863 or go online at [www.agmediation.org](http://www.agmediation.org). All calls are confidential.



**AGRICULTURAL  
MEDIATION  
PROGRAM**

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## Doing the Right Thing

gaps. I have my doubts, but foresters tend to be optimists, and they are comfortable with waiting many years for results to take hold.

With the encouragement from clouds of mosquitoes and black flies, I got back into the car. We continued to slowly drive down the seasonal county road, marveling at the skillful forest management. Blue boundary paint marked the lines between harvested areas and blocks that were not to be harvested, although post-harvest, the boundaries were quite apparent without the blue paint. No paint marks

within those dense stands. Probably different forestowners, and rather unfortunate for the trees and associated suites of wildlife.

"Doing the right thing" has much to do with defining "right". In this case, it's all about correcting mistakes of the past and providing as many benefits to people, forests, and wildlife as possible. Then, "doing" begins with making a decision. Sometimes, this is the hardest part.

*This article was published by Michigan State University Extension. For more information, visit [www.msue.msu.edu](http://www.msue.msu.edu).*

## Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events

### September

- 7 Manistee Stream Leader Certification, 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., meet at Kalkaska Conservation District - Kalkaska, for more information go [kalkaskaconservation.org/events](http://kalkaskaconservation.org/events)
- 7 MI Paddle Stewards, 9 a.m. to 10:40 a.m., SW Michigan Planning Commission - Benton Harbor, for more information go to [canr.msu.edu/events](http://canr.msu.edu/events)
- 12-13 Farm Drainage Field Day, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. (lunch provided), 8815 Samaria Rd. - Riga, for more information and to register go to <https://events.canr.msu.edu/Field19/>
- 13 Farmer Education Day, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., Meadow Creek Ranch - Reed City, for more information and to RSVP call the Osceola-Lake Conservation District at 231/465-8012
- 14 MI Paddle Stewards, 9 a.m., Hessel School House - Hessel, for more information go to [canr.msu.edu/events](http://canr.msu.edu/events)
- 16 MI Paddle Stewards, 9 a.m., Sault Country Club - Sault Ste. Marie, for more information go to [canr.msu.edu/events](http://canr.msu.edu/events)
- 21 Annual Cleanup on the Manistee River, 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., meet at Burger King - Kalkaska, for more information go to [kalkaskaconservation.org/events](http://kalkaskaconservation.org/events)

### September ctd.

- 28 Native Plant Sale, Workshop and Invasive Species Workshop, workshop at 9 a.m., plant sale from noon to 1 p.m., Festival of the Pines - Lake City, for more information go to [www.missaukee.org](http://www.missaukee.org)
- 30 MI Paddle Stewards, 9 a.m. to 10:30 a.m., Gibraltar Community Center - Gibraltar, for more information go to [canr.msu.edu/events](http://canr.msu.edu/events)

### October

- 5 Northern Michigan Forestry & Wildlife Habitat Expo, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Kirtland Community College - Grayling, for more information and to register go <https://events.canr.msu.edu>
- 5 Mansitee River Stream Sampling Day, 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., Kalkaska Conservation District - Kalkaska, for more information go to [kalkaskaconservation.org/events](http://kalkaskaconservation.org/events)
- 28-30 Michigan Association of Conservation Districts Fall Convention, Shanty Creek - Bellaire, for more information go to [macd.org/fall-convention](http://macd.org/fall-convention)



### New Publications Available

Several new publications are available from the NRCS Distribution Center. Two of these are the new guide to 2018 Farm Bill programs and the 2019 pollinator poster, "Endangered Pollinators and their Habitats." They can be viewed or ordered online at: <https://nrcspad.sc.egov.usda.gov/DistributionCenter/default.aspx>



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