Helping People Help the Land

Conservation Notes

USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service - **Michigan**

September/October 2019

Conservancy Uses NRCS Program to Improve Forest Habitat

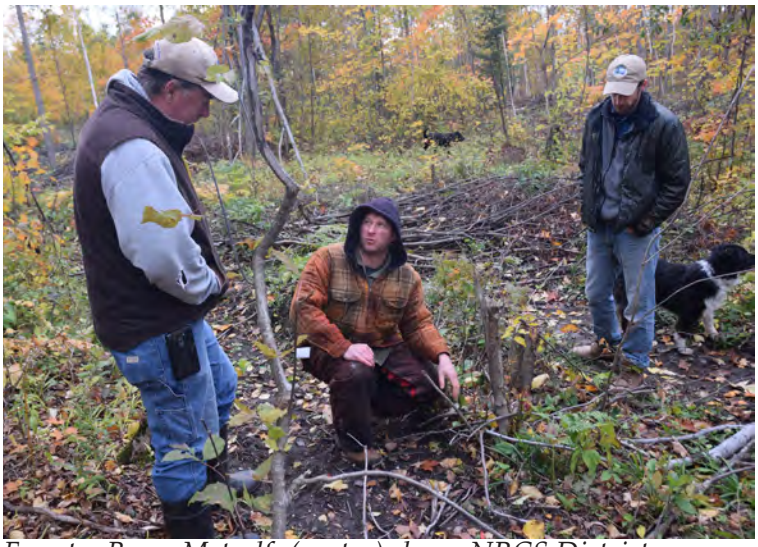
Cutting down trees can be a controversial practice for an organization dedicated to preserving land. The Little Traverse Conservancy is demonstrating how harvesting trees can benefit targeted wildlife, the local economy and the organization's efforts to protect additional lands.

LTC's recent efforts to improve wildlife habitat through targeted tree harvests is receiving assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Regional Conservation Partnership Program, administered by NRCS. Specifically, LTC is receiving assistance through an RCPP project led by the American Bird Conservancy to improve forest habitat for potentially-threatened bird species including the golden-winged warbler.

"It was perfect timing for us, we were looking for grant opportunities," said Derek Shiels, director of stewardship for LTC.

LTC acquired the 640-acre Jack & Tucker Harris Working Forest Reserve in Cheboygan County in 2016. The land had a history of logging, grazing and contained buildings and trailers that had to be removed. "It's a great piece of land to experiment with," said Shiels. LTC only recently began designating land as Working Forest Reserves where it will conduct sustainable timber harvests in order to improve forest habitat, produce revenue, and participate in the region's forest products industry. LTC is planning to harvest trees on about 120 acres in four locations on this reserve, said Shiels.

LTC hired a private consulting forester, Bryce Metcalfe, to develop a forest management plan for



Forester Bryce Metcalfe (center) shows NRCS District Conservationist Boyd Bylelich (left) and Derek Shiels of the Little Traverse Conservancy the results of a selected timber harvest to benefit threatened forest bird species.

the Harris Reserve that would meet the habitat goals of LTC and the RCPP project while offsetting some of the costs with a commercial tree harvest. The habitat goal was to create forest openings that benefit the golden-winged warbler and other threatened bird species. The plan called for leaving at least 5 to 15, higher canopy broadleaf trees, like maples, on every acre cleared for perching.

Metcalfe started with a forest management plan including a species inventory and timber value assessment. The Harris Reserve had a broad range of wildlife habitats but not much timber potential,

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State Conservationist's Message

I was deeply humbled and honored this week to receive the 2019 Friend of Conservation Award from the Michigan Association of Conservation Districts during their Fall Convention.

As we know, conservation districts and the predecessor to NRCS, the Soil Conservation Service, were created to work together to serve the farming community. Soil Conservation Districts were to provide local leadership while the SCS would provide the technical knowledge.

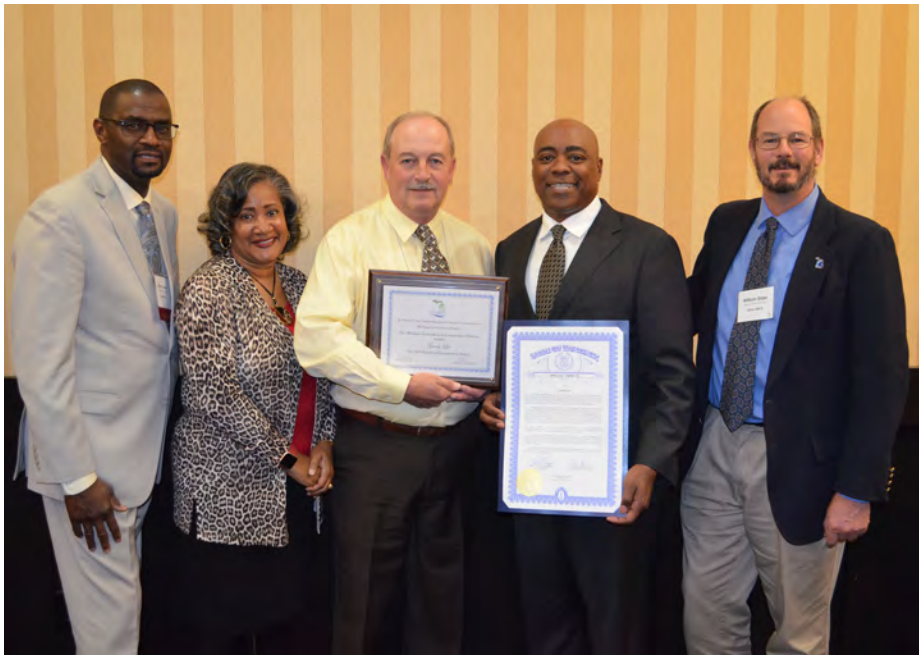
As Michigan's State Conservationist, I have endeavored to support this model of partnership. At the same time, local conservation districts have done their part by identifying the conservation needs and priorities of the people and land they serve.

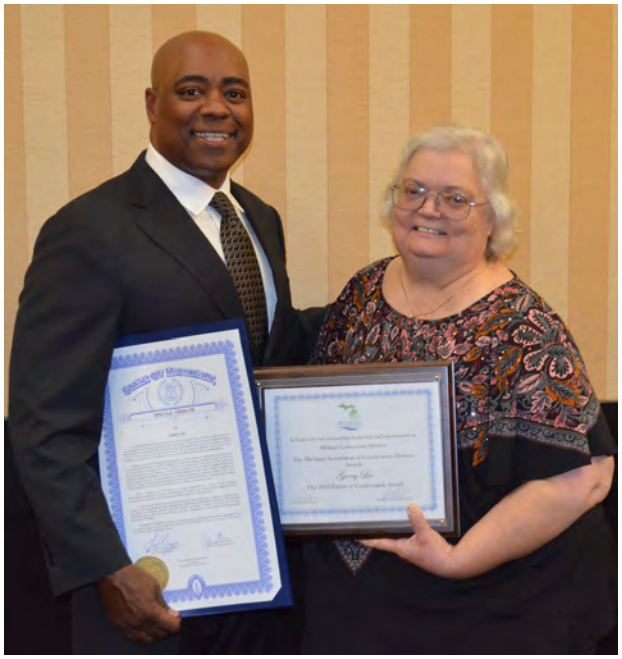
It was appropriate that Genesee Conservation District Conservation District Board Member Nancy Szikszay later presented me with a Tribute from the State of Michigan. Her district approached NRCS about the need in their community for locally-grown healthy food and requested funding to help local producers purchase seasonal high tunnels.

State Conservationist Garry Lee

Allocating funds is not difficult, but utilizing those funds requires boots on the ground and established relationships in the community. The Genesee Conservation District was up to the challenge and the Genesee High Tunnel Initiative has been a huge success.

The Genesee High Tunnel Initiative is only one example of how Michigan's Conservation Districts and NRCS have worked together to protect our natural resources and supported the agricultural and private forest owner communites. Through county-level and state-level initiatives, NRCS and local Conservation Districts have worked together effectively to promote conservation. I look forward to continuing this partnership.





Michigan Association of Conservation Districts State Council President Art Pelon presented State Conservationist Garry Lee with the 2019 MACD Friend of Conservation Award during the organization's Fall Convention. Pictured (above left l-r) are Area 4 Conservationist Albert Jones, Assistant State Conservationist for Management and Strategy Diane Gray, Pelon, Lee, and Area 2 Conservationist Bill Elder. Genesee Conservation District Board Member Nancy Szikszay (above right) later presented Lee with a Special Tribute from the State of Michigan.

- photo provided by MACD

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Conservancy Uses NRCS Program to Improve Forest Habitat

Metcalfe said. After he determined what areas would be harvested and what trees would remain, he solicited bids for logging the tracts during winter of 2018. No bids were received as the site contained mostly pulp woods. Eventually Metcalfe was able to negotiate a harvest through an area wood mill.

(above left) An oak sapling grows where trees were selectively harvested for wildlife habitat. (above right) This maple tree was selected to remain after the trees around it were harvested. The tree will provide a perching location for birds like the golden-winged warbler.

Improving wildlife habitat and managing for healthy forests is LTC's goal when conducting harvests. Revenue from tree harvests is used to offset the cost of managing the forests and for acquiring more land, said Shiels. "Bryce is our advocate to get the most out of it."

"If you want the habitat improvement you have to get the harvest done," said Metcalfe. In addition to wildlife, the timber industry, including consulting foresters, loggers, truckers and mills, benefit from working forest reserves like the Harris Reserve.

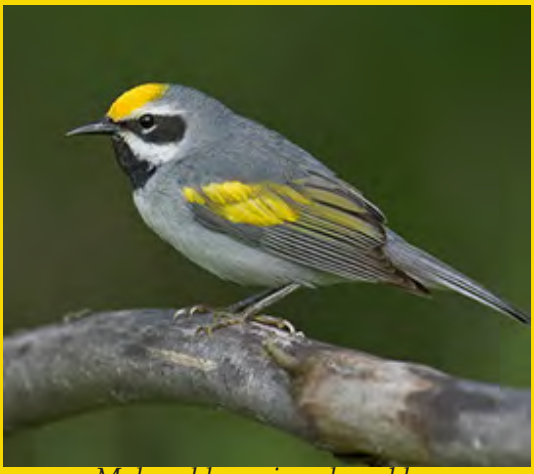
Metcalfe has worked with many landowners to improve forest habitat on their land. The results of a selective tree harvest aren't esthetically appealing right away which can upset some landowners, even when they've been shown photos of what the results will look like. "You have to try to see the beauty in the mess," he said.

Bird species including brown thrashers, eastern whip-poor-wills, yellow warblers, chestnut-sided warblers, woodcock and grouse will benefit right away from the selective tree clearings, said Kayla Knoll, a biologist with American Bird Conservancy working out of Marquette. Other animals like deer and elk also benefit, she said. Golden-winged warblers will experience the most habitat benefits a couple of years after the harvest when shrubs become established. Sightings of the golden-winged warbler have been recorded near the Harris Reserve on the eBird bird-sighting website.

RCPP Funding Available for Forest Habitat Improvement

The Improving Forest Health for At-Risk Wildlife Resources project is led by the American Bird Conservancy and was selected for funding through the USDA Regional Conservation Partnership Program in 2015. Private non-industrial forestland owners are eligible to apply for conservation financial assistance through the project to improve wildlife habitat.

The eligibility area in Michigan includes the Upper Peninsula counties of Baraga, Delta, Dickinson, Gogebic, Houghton, Iron, Mackinac, Marquette, Menominee, Ontonagon and Schoolcraft and the lower peninsula counties of Alcona, Antrim, Cheboygan, Emmet, Iosco, Kalkaska, Manistee, Ogemaw, Oscoda, Otsego and Wexford.



Male golden-winged warbler.
-photo courtesy of U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Fiscal year 2020 is the final year of the original RCPP agreement but the American Bird Conservancy is hoping to extend the agreement, said ABC Biologist Kayla Knoll.

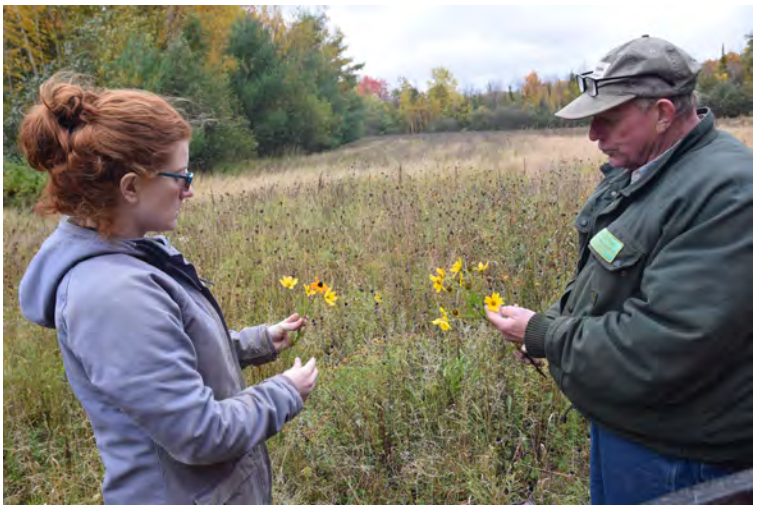
Roscommon Landowner Creates Pollinator Paradise

When Rex Wolfsen had the opportunity to buy some property across the road from his Roscommon County home, he decided to transform it from a dump to a haven for pollinators and wildlife.

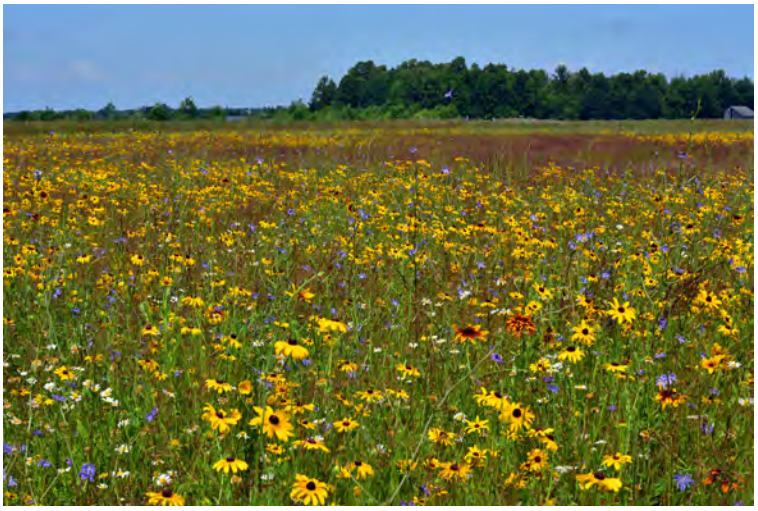
Wolfsen utilized funding from the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program to plant 13 acres of wildflowers and grasses and additional acres to flowering shrubs and clover. Before planting, he removed derelict buildings and other debris from part of the property. Wolfsen also did soil testing and applied lime in preparation for planting and researched available seed mixtures.

He planted a wildflower mix in spring of 2018 and the results were so impressive that the local paper ran a story with photos this past summer. "I had butterflies I'd never seen before," said Wolfsen. Bumble bees were also in abundance all summer long. In addition to the beauty of the flowers and the butterflies and the sound of the bees the smells were nice too. "The aroma from the clover, man if you could bottle that," Wolfsen mused.

Wolfsen built his home from locally harvested trees, collects maple sap for syrup, grinds his own corn meal and raises chickens. About five years ago, he began raising honey bees because, "a guy ought to try that." He credits his flower plantings for a major boost in honey production. His hives produced 20 gallons of honey compared to 15 the year before, he said.



(above) NRCS District Conservationist Sharcy Ray and landowner Rex Wolfsen examine flowers from a conservation planting on his property.



The Houghton Lake Resorter published photos of Wolfsen's NRCS planting in July 2019. The wildflowers were in full bloom (above right). A bumble bee collects food from a flowering clover (right). Close up of a brown eyed susan and aldfkjal;kdjfa

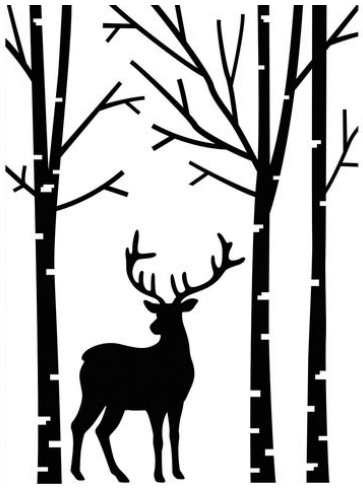
-photos by Krista Tracey-Cater, Houghton Lake Resorter

New Challenges Inspire New Forest Management Methods

by Bill Cook, MSU Extension

Northern Hardwoods is the most common forest type in Michigan. A forest type is an association of a particular group of tree species, usually named for those that dominate the association. Sugar maple leads the pack in Northern Hardwoods, with variable mixes of red maple, basswood, yellow birch, hemlock, and many others.

High quality sites are described by certain soil properties, particularly soils that are nutrient-rich and well-drained. The retreating glaciers left us with a generous mix of land forms and young soil compositions. Blue cohosh, leatherwood, maidenhair fern, and Canada lily are a few of the plants that hint at these higher quality sites.



The owner of a quality Northern Hardwood stand on good soils is, indeed, a wealthy person. I define wealth not merely by stacks of coin hoarded in the local bank, but more by the appreciation of a wide range of management alternatives and complex ecologies. Knowing what you have is sometimes better than wanting what you don't.

To better understand "expanding gap" management, it's valuable to understand how it fits within forest science. So, let's take a whirlwind tour.

The traditional management system to promote high quality sugar maple has been single-tree selection. Research on this began almost a hundred years ago in the Lake States, by a bunch of really smart guys. That legacy remains with us and it works.

This should not be confused with the crude "select cuts" where owners "cut the best and leave the rest". Rather, single-tree selection gradually and artfully improves the quality of the stand of trees by removing the poorest trees first and balancing size classes. The forest responses are immensely rewarding.

Not all forest types do well with selection management. It has been specifically designed around Northern Hardwoods and trees tolerant of certain levels of shade. Alternatively, it's a really good way to ruin a perfectly good aspen stand. Differences among forest types should not come as a surprise.

In recent decades, there have been some monkey wrenches thrown at single-tree selection.

Foresters have noticed an increasing domination by sugar maple, at the expense of other tree species that "ought" to be growing amid the palmate-leaved jungle. Single-tree selection intentionally promotes this "maple-ization." Might single-tree selection work too well, at the expense of diversity?

Second, deer populations have increased across large regions of the Lake States to the point where deer prevent sugar maple (and other tree species) from becoming a new forest. This concerns foresters deeply. Yet, the love of deer has ingrained socio-cultural roots among many people with deep pockets.

Third, the changing climate and ever-more number of exotic species are changing the ecological rules of the Northern Hardwoods game. American beech is a poster-child example. Once a mainstay of many Northern Hardwood stands, exotic pathogens are driving beech into forest obscurity, as with so many other native North American tree species. These losses are disheartening.

So, foresters began scratching their heads and re-evaluating how to re-direct the natural processes that drive Northern Hardwood ecology.

Single-tree selection was actually pretty close to how Mother Nature applied her hand. However, some foresters figured that some of those holes in the forest canopy, that shone more light to the forest floor, that allowed knee-high trees to vigorously compete for that space, could be a bit larger.

Could the addition of larger gaps better enhance natural processes? What would happen if those larger gaps were built around species other than sugar maple? Would species like yellow birch and white pine have a competitive edge over the sugar maple? Or, would these richly regenerating gaps simply be garden salads for the voracious deer? Maybe the outcome would be nothing but brambles and Pennsylvania sedge?

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Hemp Growers Eligible for NRCS Conservation Programs

The 2018 Farm Bill reclassified industrial hemp making it legal to grow. USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service announced a rule that outlines how states and tribes can submit plans that will enable producers to grow hemp in those areas.

This rule is a first step that enables USDA agencies that administer farm programs including NRCS, Farm Service Agency and Risk Management Agency, to provide guidance on eligibility for additional farm programs.

Eligible producers include those growing in accordance with USDA, state, and tribal plans or for research purposes under Section 7606.

In 2020, eligible hemp producers will be eligible for multiple NRCS conservation programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, and Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

Hemp producers growing in accordance with Section 7606 will not need to modify their conservation program contract for their continued participation.

For more information go to the Hemp and Farm Bill Programs page at farmers.gov.

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New Challenges Require New Forest Management Methods

The results, so far, have been mixed. No surprise there, either.

A twist on this "gap selection" scenario is "expanding gap" management. Larger gaps, maybe a half-acre, or as much as an acre or two, in size were scattered throughout the Northern Hardwoods. In another decade, or so, return to these gaps and harvest rings around them, kind of like a donuts, maybe as wide as a hundred feet. Keep doing this until the gaps merge and the entire forest has been regenerated to conditions with different ages and physical structures.

Will the larger, more open, areas be able to move enough trees beyond deer browse heights to grow a new forest? What if lots of cut tops were left on-site as a physical barrier to deer? Will the tops last long enough for new trees to out-grow the deer?

Again, mixed results and with the jury still duking-out the verdict. The U.P. Land Conservancy has been watching progress on one of their working forests since 2008.

To better address this deer and forest regeneration quagmire, the Michigan DNR and MSU have recently em-placed a monster study in the northern Lower Peninsula and across the entire Upper Peninsula. There are 140 30-acre sites (over 4000 acres) with a mix of treatments to help figure-out how Northern Hardwoods might be managed in the face of high deer densities. It's an aggressive ten-year research project that might easily last longer.

There are some very clever people guiding this huge freighter, and the holds are filling with volumes of data.

One might ask, why not simply use the do-nothin-and-let-nature-take-its-course scenario? We know that's not working across much of the Lake States. These forests are not regenerating. Tree diversity is decreasing. Neither the current forest compositions nor the high deer populations are "natural". Both are human-caused after a 150 years of landscape occupation. Management can reset this compass, to a certain degree.

There are two species that can affect the long-term trajectories of forest ecology; human beings and white-tailed deer. Only humans can make a choice for a better future. Deer can only eat their way into oblivion.

The exploitative logging and rampant wildfires of a hundred years ago have left us with the forests that we have today, in which foresters have worked to manage in order to provide as many products and services as possible. Forest management can restore some of the forest characteristics lost during the Paul Bunyan years and, maybe, compensate for the damage that deer impart.

Our grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, will be the heirs of our decisions, or lack of decision.

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

Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events

November

6 Harmful Algae Blooms: Ecology, Impacts and Management Options, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Kellogg Center - East Lansing, for more information go to canr.msu.edu

14 Hoophouse Workshop, 6 to 8 p.m., Pickford Public Library - Pickford, for more information go to maeap.org/event

December

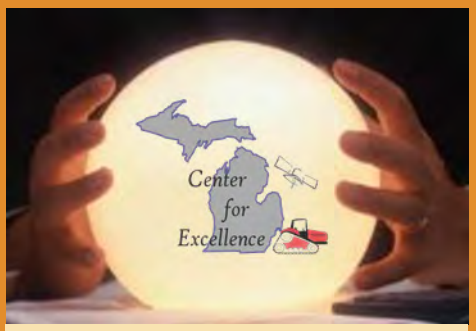
10 Saginaw Bay Agricultural Conservation Awards, 6 to 9 p.m., Double Tree - Bay City, for more information and to register go to nature.org

10-12 Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable & Farm Market Expo, DeVos Place Conference Center - Grand Rapids, for more information go to: glexpo.com

17 Timber Tax Workshop, 5 to 7 p.m., Gladwin Public Library - Gladwin, for questions or to RSVP contact Nia.Becker@macd.org or 989/539-6401

18 Integrated Crop & Pest Management Update, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., MSU Pavilion - East Lansing, for more information go to: canr.msu.edu/events/

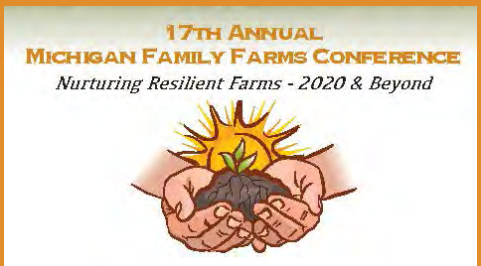
Save the Date:



Center for Excellence Crop Day
Friday, January 10
8 a.m. - RSVP by Jan. 3
contact the Lenawee Conservation District at 517/263-7400 ext. 3

NORTHERN MICHIGAN SMALL FARM CONFERENCE

January 24 & 25
Grand Traverse Resort - Acme
smallfarmconference.com



Saturdy, February 8
8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
Kalamazoo Valley CC - Kalamazoo
miffs.org/mffc2020