



BRANCH COUNTY 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

MESSAGE FROM THE DISTRICT DIRECTOR



Despite the ongoing pandemic of 2021, Michigan State University Extension continued to work for Branch County youth, adults, businesses and communities providing outstanding research-based education and community development programs.

With the learning curve of on-line programming behind us, we continued to expand and perfect our digital educational offerings.

Considering the health and safety of participants, many of our face-to-face programs provided both an in-person and remote option to participate.

Our educators found creative ways to offer outdoor programs and engage with schools and community groups while maintaining social distancing.

This report provides a snapshot of our accomplishments from 2021. Please reach out to me or anyone from MSU Extension with ideas for programs, contacts for new partners or feedback on our work. It takes all of us to bring the best programming to the district.

Thank you for your continued partnership and support of Michigan State University Extension in Branch County.

Julie Pioch, District Director

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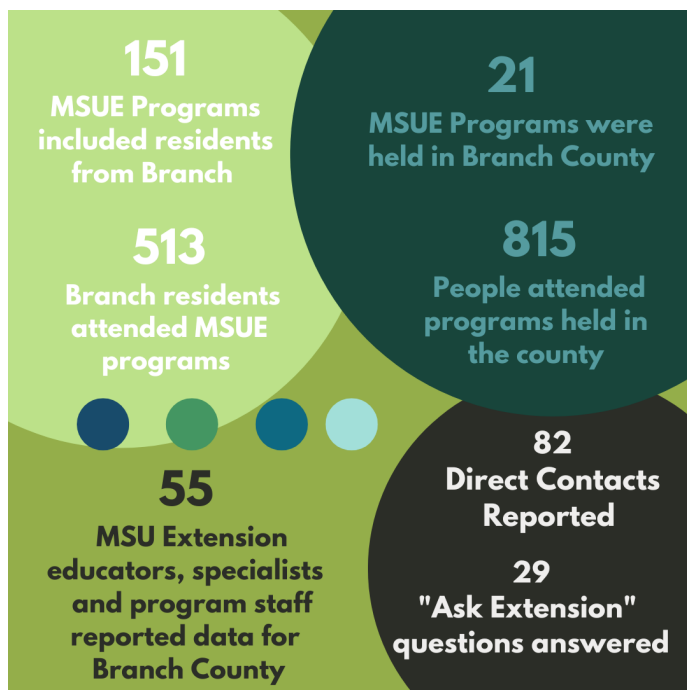
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BY THE NUMBERS



**BRANCH COUNTY
GENERAL FUND
APPROPRIATION**

**2019 \$121,588
2020 \$127,417
2021 \$124,055**

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4-H AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

A total of 617 youth were enrolled in 33 Branch County 4-H Clubs in 2021. In addition, 134 adult volunteers dedicated their time to mentoring, teaching, and providing leadership to the program. In order to maintain a high-quality program that is safe and welcoming to all youth, 4-H staff time was invested in training and coaching volunteers. Working one on one with leaders to manage safety protocols imposed during the pandemic was essential in helping them convene club meetings remotely and in organizing activities that would keep young people engaged. To equip our volunteers with skills to manage conflict, each leader was required to participate in a short online training in order to stay in good standing in 2021. The Branch 4-H Leaders Council took leadership in organizing fundraising activities, countywide community service projects and program promotion in 2021. The Branch 4-H Foundation supported county 4-H efforts through funding activities and providing youth scholarships. In close partnership with the Branch County Fair Board, 4-Her's showcased their projects at a face-to-face event in 2021.

PREPARING YOUNG PEOPLE FOR SUCCESS

To introduce new audiences to 4-H and inspire youth to explore pathways to careers in fisheries and wildlife, the 4-H Wild Spartans program was held monthly from October 2020 to May 2021. The synchronous series had 143 families enrolled including families from Branch County. The program reached 51 families that were new to 4-H. Each virtual session introduced youth to a scientist, their research and field work, and the education and career path they followed. The series included a live session with each scientist where youth were encouraged to ask questions. Youth asked over 300 unique questions, positive responses, and comments that allowed the team to evaluate learning and engagement with the subject matter. All sessions were recorded, closed captioned and saved on a website as a readily searchable resource for educators and home school audiences. Each recording includes links for continued STEM learning & 4-H Career Preparation resources.

LEADERSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The Michigan 4-H China Project is a global education program that uses the arts for both in-school and after-school learning experiences. More than 300,000 Michigan youth have participated in this project. The goals of the program for Michigan K-to-6th-graders include exploring similarities between their lives and the lives of their counterparts halfway around the world; provide an opportunity to gain a sense of being part of one world, whether they live in Michigan or in Shandong Province, provide a significant learning experience that includes language, social studies, natural science and the arts. Young people are invited to send “visual letters” to children their own ages in China. Teaching kits are available to facilitate teaching about China and about making art. Each teaching kit is unique and consists of ten original pictures by Chinese children, a study guide and a description of the pictures that come with the kit. A selection of Michigan artwork is then sent to China as a gift to the children of China.

Christy Berry, teacher for Bronson Community conducted the 4-H China Art Program in her K-5 classes with a total of 470 students. Upon completion of the program, 10 pieces of student art were sent to Michigan State University for the 2022 China Art Exchange traveling to China. Ms. Berry shared her experience with other teachers to promote the project and did a video conference about the program. She rated the China Art Program as excellent and said that students increased their knowledge of China and the country's culture and have expressed an interest in learning more about other countries. Students demonstrated an understanding of differences and similarities between themselves and children from China.



An event to promote 4-H and hands-on STEM activities was held in partnership with Branch County 4-H Leaders Council, Branch County 4-H Foundation and Max Larson Elementary in Coldwater as part of their summer school classes.



“The Magic Flower,” created by Bronson Schools elementary Student Aaron Ivans, was sent to MSU as part of the 4-H China Art Exchange.



“Sheep,” created by Bronson Schools elementary Student Bryanna Gonzalos was sent to MSU as part of the 4-H China Art Exchange.



AGRICULTURE

MI AG IDEAS TO GROW WITH VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

MSU Extension Agriculture Educators rose to the challenge in 2021 in being able to continue to pivot their traditional educational efforts to methods that would provide clientele with access to programs and information from their homes or office. One significant effort developed to meet this need was the MI Ag Ideas to Grow With virtual conference.

This unique event combined the annual events of Ag Action Day, Branch County Farmers Day, and Southwest Michigan Horticulture Days into a week-long virtual program. It featured subject matter tracks from livestock production, fruit and vegetable production, sustainability, soil health and irrigation to horticulture and home gardening. A track was also offered for youth participants. All in all, 55 different education sessions were offered.

Each day focused on specific topics with sessions occurring at the top of every hour. The horticulture, home gardening and animal agriculture sessions were featured daily throughout the week. Educators worked with state officials to make it possible for attendees to receive RUP and CCA credits for eligible sessions.

While this program was developed to provide access to education typically delivered at MSU Extension's in-person programming the success of the virtual platform exceeded the expectations of the planning team. During the weeklong event participants from 47 counties in Michigan (including Branch) attended sessions and over 980 sessions were accessed by clientele. Attendees included some who have not participated in the traditional in-person programs in the past.

"Thank you so much for putting on this conference. I've attended the past few years and I always learn a lot. You guys do a really good job of providing various quality materials and knowledgeable speakers."

MSU EXTENSION PROMOTES ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

MSU Educator, Sarah Fronczak, assisted two family farms in siting barns to house 1,500 feeder pigs in Branch County. The siting process assures that new farm facilities are being placed where their impact on the environment and humans are minimal. It was important to the farmers to follow the Generally Accepted Agricultural Management Practices set by Right to Farm because of their dedication to the community they live in. These barns will provide stock for the growing pork processing industry in Michigan. Michigan's pork industry contributes \$500 million to the state's economy annually, according to the Michigan Pork Producer's Association.

MSU EXTENSION RESPONDS TO CHANGING CROP INSURANCE REQUIREMENTS TO ASSIST FARMERS WITH ECONOMIC DECISION MAKING

For the 2021 production year, producers were required to select which Farm Bill program would work best for their farms. The choice between Price Loss Coverage (PLC) and Agricultural Loss Coverage (ARC) was different than the one made for 2019/2020. Making the decision more complex for producers is the importance of considering crop insurance options that tie-in to these Farm Bill programs. In response to this challenge MSU Extension Farm Management educators in partnership with Michigan Farm Bureau developed the "2021 Farm Bill Program & Crop Insurance Decisions – What Fits Your Farm?" series to help guide producers through these considerations and make the best choice for their farms. Eleven Branch County producers joined 272 others to participate in this series.

The series spanned three weeks and was conducted via Zoom. Each meeting had a regional focus, providing examples and participation from local crop insurance specialists from those areas.

BIOLOGICAL CONTROL SERIES FOR THE FLORICULTURE INDUSTRY

Managing pests is a consistent challenge for greenhouse growers. This is due largely to exponential population growth rates, a propensity for developing insecticide resistance, and life stages that are either inaccessible or protected from conventional management methods. Biological control is a pest management strategy that makes use of living organisms to protect crops from damage due to insects and disease. Transitioning to a biological approach does not happen instantaneously. The methods are based on a fundamentally different philosophy than conventional techniques and several seasons are often needed before practitioners begin to master the nuances of working with live organisms to control plant pests.

In response, a 4-part series of live weekly webcasts on called Bug Bites! was designed to foster discussions geared toward floriculture production systems. The series featured four guest educators from Canada and the United States. Discussion topics were suggested specifically by Michigan growers.

A total of 186 registrants from 31 countries, 24 U.S. states, and 16 Michigan counties (including Branch) participated. Participants completed a post-session survey to assess learning impacts and discern the readiness of attendees to implement changes presented during the program. A total of 46 surveys were completed from growers and pest management professionals representing 12.4 million square feet of managed protected production space.



AGRICULTURE

ERAIL TEAM DEPLOYS EMERGENCY RESPONSE EQUIPMENT TRAILER IN BRANCH COUNTY

The Emergency Response to Accidents Involving Livestock (ERAIL) program is a comprehensive training and response program spearheaded by Michigan State University Extension. The program is aimed at serving Michigan’s animal agriculture industry by providing resources to assist in the response to an accident that involves livestock. The ERAIL Program consists of different aspects including, training of first responders (often volunteer firemen and law enforcement officers), animal haulers and other local stakeholders on how to properly respond when animals are involved in a traffic accident, providing access to equipment that will aid in the accident response and creating a network of trained responders throughout the state.

A key goal of the ERAIL project is to provide first responders across the state with access to the tools and equipment needed to properly respond to an accident involving livestock. ERAIL Response Trailers are cargo trailers fully stocked with equipment and supplies that may be needed when responding to an accident involving livestock. Accidents of this type typically require specialized equipment not normally carried in first responder vehicles. By locating these trailers in areas of the state that typically see high levels of animal movement and are close to major highways, those responding to accidents will be better able to access the type of equipment needed to make an effective and efficient response. Along with providing accessibility to these needed resources, the ERAIL team provides training for these audiences on forming local teams, proper use of equipment included in the trailers, and safety tips for first responders including information on animal behavior and animal handling. Hands-on trainings were held in Branch County in 2021 reaching 22 participants.

The ERAIL Program currently has 3 trailers fully stocked and deployed in Michigan with trailers located in Otsego, Jackson and Branch Counties.

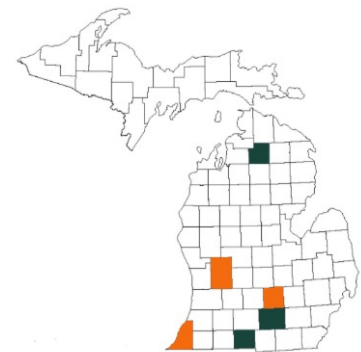
The ERAIL team provides first responders, law enforcement officials and animal control officers in the close vicinity of the established trailer with training designed specifically to educate participants on the equipment and resources housed in the ERAIL Response Trailers. Branch County and the surrounding areas have been recent participants in this training. This training focused on how responders should use the specific equipment, identify creative ways that the equipment can be used and provided participants the opportunity to work through typical situations that happen when responding to accidents involving animals.

It is important for teams that have access to specialized equipment to also know how to utilize the tools and resources available to them. Following the training, 100% of the participants indicated that they gained knowledge on deploying the trailer dedicated to Branch County and 94.11% of the program participants gained knowledge on using the equipment that is available to them.

MSU Extension will continue to provide training opportunities and resources in this area, focusing on training first responders, law enforcement officials and animal control officers on how to respond effectively to transportation accidents when animals are involved, providing access to essential equipment required to mount an effective response, and creating an organized network of trained responders throughout the state. This will help minimize the risks associated with these events for those involved in the response as well as minimize the economic and animal welfare risks facing the animal agriculture industry when these types of events occur.



Program participants receiving instruction for the training activity in Branch County.



Trainees in Branch County working through scenario situations for accidents involving livestock.



COMMUNITY VITALITY & NATURAL RESOURCES

ARPA FUNDS TRAINING

MSU Extension partnered with the Michigan Association of Regions to host 14 workshops around the state for local and tribal government officials to discuss American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Coronavirus Local Fiscal Recovery Fund spending opportunities. Participants were able to attend the sessions in person or join remotely. The sessions covered ARPA fund basic rules, best practices and early examples of ARPA spending; practical considerations for contracts, accounting, and project management. Group discussion centered on regional collaboration, leveraging funding sources and setting priorities. This workshop series had over 750 participants from Michigan's units of government including 3 from Branch County. When asked about the workshop one participant said:

"Great job! I am thinking more broadly about ways to use our ARPA funds. I was very pleased with the attendance, facilitation, the information shared and received as well as the flow of the workshop."

FISCALLY READY COMMUNITY SERIES

Several Branch County community leaders joined 390 others in attending a four-part series, created to assist communities establish, measure, and maintain policies to increase operational and financial effectiveness and safeguards. The Fiscally Ready Communities series was a program designed by MSU Extension in partnership with the Michigan Department of Treasury to help local governments work toward fiscal health by sharing best practices in fiscal sustainability.

WHAT IS "ASK EXTENSION"?

MSU Extension's ["Ask Extension"](#) is an online tool that can be used by community members to get answers from MSU Extension experts. Questions received have ranged from food safety, agriculture and gardening, to natural resources questions relating to frogs and snakes to land use and home ownership questions. As seen on the infographic on the cover page of this report MSU Extension answered 29 inquiries from Branch County residents.

Once questions are submitted, they are "wrangled" by a team at MSU Extension and forwarded to the MSU expert who can answer the question. Questions come in from all around Michigan as well as from all over the county. With our national extension service network, some questions are even answered by colleagues from other universities when needed.

Seeing what questions are submitted can also help MSU Extension educators see trends and identify needs for other educational products like articles or even research projects.

The trend for use of the site is going up as we look over the last few years. Since 2017, there has been a significant increase in the number of questions each year. MSU Extension staff promote this online tool at events such as Home and Garden Shows, articles, email signatures, presentations, program related websites, and more.

INTRO TO LAKES LEADERSHIP COURSE

Three Branch County residents joined 286 attendees in the six-week Introduction to Lakes course in 2021. The program is now in its 4th year. The series focuses on developing local leaders through education in lake ecology and management. The series combines self directed educational sessions with online communication between participants and instructors through topical discussion forums. Participants also attend three webinar sessions with instructors and outside experts.

MICORPS COOPERATIVE LAKES MONITORING PROGRAM

The Michigan Clean Water Corps (MiCorps) is a network of volunteer water quality monitoring programs in Michigan. It was created to assist the Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) in collecting and sharing water quality data for use in water resources management and protection programs. The MiCorps Cooperative Lakes Monitoring Program (CLMP) is Michigan's long term volunteer lake monitoring program MSU Extension plays a leading role in management of this citizen science program and received funds in 2021 to continue to coordinate the program for the next 5 years. The primary purpose of the CLMP is to help citizen volunteers monitor water quality and habitat in their lake and document changes in lake quality over time.

In 2021, three lakes from Branch County were enrolled in the CLMP. Branch County volunteers have been monitoring their lakes through this program for many years and have had enrollees in the program since 2012.

Part of a successful citizen science program is educational programs that train volunteers on proper data collection and provide a sense of community between the volunteers. Branch County volunteers attended MSU Extension's annual training at the Michigan Lakes and Streams Associations conference in 2021. The day long program provided training for volunteers on water quality and habitat parameter protocols. Several volunteers also attended a Spring kick off in May and follow up Summer meeting. The impact of this program not only improves the knowledge and skills of the volunteers who work within it but also the health and protection of Michigan's inland lakes and streams.



HEALTH AND NUTRITION

FOOD SAFETY TEAM

In 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic progressed forcing people to stay home, interest in gardening and preserving food at home skyrocketed. This was seen by the enormous interest in our online Food Preservation classes as well as in retail settings where garden seeds, canning jars, lids, and canners became precious commodities and very hard to access. After moving quickly to pivot MSU Extension Food Preservation classes to an online format there was an explosion of interest as evidenced by more than 10,000 people registering for online classes from June-December 2020.

Continuing into 2021, we recognize that online learning offers opportunities to reach more people with education on safe home food preservation practices. Distance learning can address the discrepancies caused by socioeconomic and geographic differences, schedules, and ease of accessibility. The team reached 7,189 people in nearly 400 programs including 13 programs that included 14 residents from Branch County. Food Preservation classes were offered from mid-January through early December 2021. Each program included a lesson, and a panel to answer consumer questions. In 2021, a variety of food preservation topics were covered in order to provide research-based education and resources to consumers on safely preserving food at home.

HEALTH TEAM

The MSU Extension health team offers a variety of programs to help people learn to improve their lives through educational programs in social emotional issues, chronic disease, addiction and pain management. The MSU Extension health team held 33 programs that included 62 residents from Branch County. Program highlights for 2021 include:

Mindful Mondays Lunch & Learn teaches and encourages the use of mindfulness self-care skills to help participants feel better and enjoy life more. Research has shown that practicing mindfulness is effective in reducing stress-related symptoms such as worry, depression and physical tension, and may be helpful in managing chronic conditions such as cardiac disease and diabetes. Topics covered in these Monday sessions included breathing techniques, mindful eating, changing negative self-talk, and mindfulness for parents and caregivers. This online series reached more than 2000 participants including residents from Branch County.

RELAX is a four-part educational series designed to help adults, parents and caregivers increase their knowledge about anger issues and put anger management and healthy relationship skills into practice. Through presentations, group discussion and skill-building activities, participants learn what anger is, what triggers anger, calming down and de-stressing methods, the principles of problem solving, effective communication skills and forgiving and letting go of the past. In 2021, programs reached nearly 600 participants including residents of Branch County.

NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

With a focus on reaching those in the community who are eligible to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Benefits (SNAP), MSU Extension works with community partners to present one-time lessons and 6 to 8 session series on nutrition and physical activity education to students, adults and seniors. The SNAP education curriculum is an evidence-based program that helps people lead healthier lives, teaches people about good nutrition and how to make their food dollars stretch further. In 2021, Community Nutrition Instructors completed series with 77 youth and 12 adults. Education was provided both in person and online and in partnership with Union City Library, Coldwater Branch Library, Mid-Michigan Health, Burnside Senior Center, and Tommy’s house.

