MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

OTTAWA COUNTY ANNUAL REPORT 2025

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Message from the District Director

In 2025, MSU Extension in Ottawa County supported community vitality through research-based education in agriculture, food systems, youth development, and entrepreneurship. Collaboration with county departments and community organizations expanded access and responsiveness to local needs. These accomplishments reflect a shared commitment and vision. We appreciate Ottawa County partners and stakeholders for their engagement and for advancing positive outcomes across the county.
Sincerely, Kai Gritter

Impact

35 community coalitions and partnerships that MSU Extension staff are members of

583 programs (across the state) attended by Ottawa County residents

3,027 participants from the county attending programs and 4-H

161 volunteers serving the county

168 answered Ask Extension questions

380 client consultations

Community Impact

44,119 contacts through social media, web activity, e-newsletters, and handouts

1,757 participants attending programs hosted in the county

476 virtual programs related to Financial Education, Food Systems, Water and Environmental Quality, Government and Businesses

204 soil test samples processed for Ottawa County

72,517 participants in community, food, and environment programs from across Michigan

70 programs hosted in the county

Financial Literacy

In 2025, Ottawa County residents attended a variety of financial literacy webinars and in-person events. MSU Extension provides resources and education on money management, foreclosure prevention, buying your own home, retirement planning and more to help residents and their families be more financially healthy. Some of the webinars Ottawa County residents attended included: Homebuyer Education, Thriving on a Fixed Income, Savvy Tips for Starting a Small Business, How Much Home Can You Afford, Making Money Decisions, Make a Spending Plan Work For You, and Top Ten Tips to Protect Your Credit.



The MSU Product Center

Michigan State University Extension and the Michigan State University Product Center assisted entrepreneurs and businesses in developing products and services in the food and agriculture markets. Its team of experts consults with clients on a one-on-one basis, helping new entrepreneurs navigate from concept development to launch and beyond. The MSU Product Center also offers specialized services such as labeling, packaging, and nutritional analysis. If you are interested in business counseling from the MSU Product Center, please visit www.canr.msu.edu/productcenter

46 Counseling hours

17 Customers helped

5 jobs created

$32,490 in annual sum sales

Community Impact



Joe Groenhof, owner of Kittywampus Soda Brewing in Zeeland, MI, was one of 30 vendors featured at the October 22, 2025 Food Showcase at the Grand Rapids Downtown Market. The event was organized by Culinary Conversations (a partnership between the Grand Rapids Downtown Market Incubator Kitchen, the MSU Product Center, and Grow & Start Garden) which builds social capital within the region's food industry.

Last year's showcase included a VIP hour, giving area retail buyers and event venue managers an opportunity to connect with business owners about sourcing their products.

Founded in 2017, Kittywampus Soda Brewing is dedicated to crafting artisanal, small-batch sodas made with Michigan-grown ingredients. Its new seasonal flavor, Apple Cinnamon Express, proved popular with showcase visitors. Other flavors include Backwoods Root Beer, Blueberry Bard Soda, Jazzin' Ginger Ale, and Cloud Hopper Cream Soda.

Michigan Apple Crunch



The Michigan Apple Crunch is an annual event hosted by MSU Extension and the Michigan Farm to Institution Network to promote National Farm to School Month and celebrate Michigan apples. Many K-12 schools, early care and education sites, institutions and organizations from around Michigan participate in the event.

In 2025, 166,571 people participated around Michigan, with **11,419** participating in Ottawa County. Some of the Ottawa County MSU Extension team joined in and participated in the crunch during a staff meeting!

Ottawa County Board Workshop

On December 18, MSU Extension facilitated a workshop on board and administrator roles and responsibilities in county government, county authority, extraordinary governance, and ethical public service for the Ottawa County Commissioners and Administration. This workshop was attended by **13 board members and administrators.**

Dig In! 2025 Series

Dig In! is an online educational series of 10 classes for Extension Master Gardeners (EMG). This is provided so that all EMGs can complete their 10-hour continuing education requirement without cost, from wherever they are located. 1,591 people participated in this series in 2025, **54 of whom were from Ottawa County.** Of note, Ottawa County participation increased by 42% compared with the previous year.

Michigan River Steelhead Program Highlights

The Michigan River Steelhead Program celebrated its fifth year in 2025. This program allows steelhead anglers to record catches using the Great Lakes Angler Diary app. River steelhead fisheries are difficult and expensive to sample using traditional methods because run timing is unpredictable, fishing occurs through the winter months, and fishing effort is spread out over many miles of remote rivers.

Last year our annual survey found that **86 participants** reported that the program increased their knowledge of stocked and wild steelhead population dynamics and fishery management policies and app users reported data on 3,320 steelhead. Results from our program were shared widely, reaching over 17,000 people through indirect channels including news articles, a web page, an annual survey report, presentations, and recorded video.



MSU Extension Educator Dr. Dan O'Keefe checks steelhead for clipped fins as part of the Michigan River Steelhead Program. The presence of an adipose fin indicates that this fish is wild.

The Michigan River Steelhead Program is led by Michigan Sea Grant and MSU Extension, with support from Michigan DNR, Brenton Consulting, Lamiglas Rods, and Detroit Area Steelheaders. For more information, explore www.michiganseagrant.org/topics/fisheries-and-aquaculture/great-lakes-angler-diary



Ottawa Sands Fisheries and Field Trips

In 2025, **79** youth joined Dr. O'Keefe as he hosted field trips for two schools at Ottawa Sands County Park. These field trips provided a great opportunity to get students outside, both for learning how to fish and to contribute to citizen science efforts. There were discussions about habitat enhancement, tagging fish, and population estimates. The youth learned a lot and had fun!

Cops and Bobbers

In 2025, Dr. O'Keefe partnered with the Ottawa County Parks Department and the Ottawa County Sheriff's Department at their annual "Cops and Bobbers" event. It was held at Ottawa Sands County Park in August, and at Grose Park in October.

This event was dedicated to introducing kids to fishing, conservation, water safety, and promoting general relationship building between the County and its residents. Over **60** individuals attended the event.



Supporting Agriculture and Agribusiness

253 participants in county agriculture programs

$244.2 billion annual impact of food and agriculture on Michigan's economy (statewide)

86 residents who participated in Beekeeping or Pollinator programs

198 Ottawa County residents who attended Great Lakes Expo

83 residents attended the Pesticide Applicator Core Manual Review & Exam

66 Ottawa County residents took the Foundations of Gardening course

Dairy Education & Dinner



In 2025, **64 Ottawa County farmers** attended programs facilitated by Dairy Educator Martin Carrasquillo Mangual. These programs included the West Michigan Dairy Educational Dinner, Animal Handling Training, Milker Meeting, Animal Nutrition, Feed Program Assessments, Parlor Performance evaluations, Manure Pit & Grain Bin Safety, and Farm Focus Group Excite Project. The Dairy Education Dinner had 23 attendees representing dairy farmers, veterinarians, and agricultural consultants. Farmers from five counties in West Michigan attended, directly impacting 92,542 lactating cows and 53,740 replacement animals (heifers and calves).

Attending consultants provide services to 15 additional herds, which indirectly impacts an estimated 5,000 animals. The focus of the dinner was on optimizing your milking parlor, with presentations on dairy reproduction strategies, milk quality, and services provided by MSU Extension. All participants surveyed stated they increased their knowledge and planned on implementing changes based on what they learned. Following the event, MSU Extension received multiple follow-up requests seeking parlor evaluations, feed assessments, and worker development services. In addition, Martin published numerous articles and podcast episodes. Martin also gave interviews and assisted farms with updated HPAI (highly pathogenic avian influenza) information as it was available.

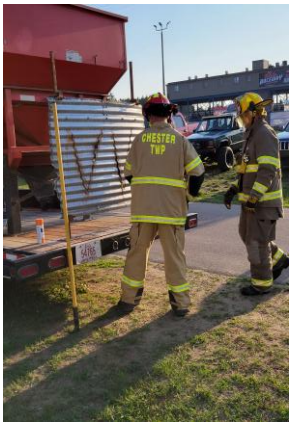
Supporting Farmland Preservation



In September, MSU Extension's Kai Gritter and Kendra Wills attended the Farms are the Tapas event in Hudsonville. This event featured a chef's competition, tapas dishes, and a silent auction. The funds raised went toward the Farmland Preservation Program in Ottawa County. MSU Extension supports farmers through programming, farm visits, and resources such as the Beginning Farmer Resource and Decision-making Guide.

FREE download at www.canr.msu.edu/resources/beginning-farmer-resource-and-decision-making-guide

Enhancing Farm Safety Practices in Michigan



MSU Extension's Bioenergy Educator M. Charles Gould and the Michigan Farm Bureau hosted four manure pit safety and grain bin safety and rescue programs for farmers and first responders. The manure pit and grain bin safety programs attracted 54 farmers across all four sites, while the grain bin rescue training attracted 80 first responders across all four sites. One of the sites was on a farm near Marne.

The Michigan Manure Summit, also hosted by M. Charles Gould and the Michigan Farm Bureau, is an annual educational event that provides updates on the science, regulations, and best practices of manure management. It is designed for those who haul and apply manure and offers required CECs for certified individuals in the Michigan Manure Hauler Certification Program. The Summit attracted 92 attendees. Many farms and firms have attended for multiple years because the topics are relevant to issues they are dealing with. Attendees continue to express interest in additional manure safety and spill response training.

Small Fruit Education

Ottawa County is home to approximately 90 blueberry growers, highlighting the crop's importance to the county's agricultural economy. In 2025, MSU Extension Small Fruit Educator Dr. Carlos Garcia-Salazar made more than 45 visits to Ottawa County blueberry farms, providing growers with technical assistance focused on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and crop management practices, as well as scouting. These on-site consultations supported growers in addressing production challenges, improving pest monitoring and control strategies, and enhancing overall crop health and productivity. In addition to his work with blueberry producers, Dr. Garcia-Salazar also assisted three small fruit growers with strawberry farm management during the 2025 growing season.

Dr. Garcia-Salazar was also involved in IPM updates, blueberry pre-harvest meetings, a cost-of-production study, and the translation of resources from English to Spanish. The MSU Extension Small Fruit program has demonstrated sustained leadership in blueberry production at the national and international levels, supporting Ottawa County's primary small fruit industry while extending expertise globally. Of note, since 2016, MSU Extension has provided technical assistance to Ukrainian blueberry growers to strengthen production systems and improve readiness for export to European markets.





Partnering with Ottawa County Conservation District for Prairie Strip Field Day

In 2025, Ottawa Conservation District partnered with the Michigan State University Kellogg Biological Station (KBS) and Shady Side Farms to host a field day focused on incorporating prairie strips into farmland operations and crop fields. MSU Extension Field Crops and Regenerative Ag Educator Christine Charles provided soil health education on prairie strips using the rainfall simulator trailer.



MSU Extension Christmas Tree Webinars

The Christmas tree industry has seen an influx of new growers, many of whom are starting to sell trees for the first time. To aid them in improving their profitability, the MSU Christmas tree team hosted a fall webinar to prepare farmers for the upcoming winter sales season. The MSU Christmas tree virtual meeting "Preparing for Sales Season" was held on September 4 and had 67 participants. Christmas tree farmers improved their knowledge of practices that will improve their farm profitability.

The Real Christmas Tree Board and MSU Extension's Bill Lindberg partnered to host a Christmas tree webinar series on September 16 and 23, 2025. This series focused on topics important for Christmas tree producers across the country (planting trees, weed control). There was a total of 225 people registered for the series from 32 American states and 4 Canadian provinces.

2025 Michigan Garden Plant Tour



The Michigan Garden Plant Tour (MGPT) is a partnership of MSU's Horticulture Department with six greenhouse businesses in Michigan (Four Star Greenhouse, Mast Young Plants, Raker and Roberta's, Pell's Greenhouse, DGI Propagators, and Walter's Gardens). The MGPT is a coordinated open house where trial gardens and young plant producers showcase gardens with new cultivars and existing catalog items for consumers, growers, seed company representatives and brokers. The goal is to evaluate new plants' garden performance under the growing conditions in Michigan.

The objective of the tour is to educate growers and industry professionals about new and existing plant selections. It was held from July 28 through August 8 of 2025. During the tour, a total of **1,504 visitors** were recorded at the host locations. As a result of the tour, 88% of respondents said they would offer at least one new cultivar to customers, 59% said they would offer between 1 and 10 new cultivars, 16% would offer between 11 and 15 cultivars, and 12% reported they would offer over 16 new cultivars.



Setting Up a Successful Biological Control

Michigan State University Extension partners with the Michigan Plant Growers Co-op (west Michigan greenhouse businesses) to host two educational meetings each winter: one in January and one in February. Heidi Lindberg is the educator board member to set up the meetings and coordinate the educational content. The educational committee meets in September each year to identify areas of focus for the coming year. The two areas of focus for 2025 were: starting a biological control program for western flower thrips and succession planning.

Youth Programming

The goal of the 4-H Youth Development model is for 4-H to "provide kids with community, mentors, and learning opportunities to develop the skills they need to create positive change in their lives." You need to look no further than the **amazing staff, youth, and families in the Ottawa County 4-H program!**



483 youth enrolled in 4-H

36 active 4-H clubs and committees

831 total youth participants

116 total 4-H volunteers

A Dairy Good Day

On April 19, Swisslane Farms hosted 4-H'ers from Kent and Ottawa counties for a day of learning about dairy cows, specifically dairy nutrition. Ottawa County MSU Extension's 4-H Program Coordinator Morgan Mills (pictured above) taught the members everything from the dairy cow's digestive system to the most common feed ingredients to managing feeding cows on a large-scale farm.



The members were then guided through an interactive activity, exploring the process of ruminant digestion using ingredients such as potato chips, ginger ale, and pop rocks to mimic food, stomach acid, and rumen microbes, respectively. Morgan also used an Excel program to show the 4-H'ers what balancing a cow's ration looks like for a nutritionist.

After their indoor lesson, the group was taken on a tour of the Swisslane Farms grounds, where they took extra time to look around the feed storage sites and identify different ingredients. The group then took a ride on the tractor over to the pens, where they were able to see how the topics covered in class were applied on a real farm. Youth were able to see cows chewing their cud and could identify small differences between the diets of two different pens of cows at different stages of lactation.

4-H'ers had a "dairy" good time learning at Swisslane Farms!

Summerfest Archers



Ottawa County MSU Extension's Morgan Mills joined in on the Coopersville Summerfest fun by hosting a booth at the Coopersville Farm Museum on August 6 to spread the word about 4-H in Ottawa County. 4-H staff brought along a practice archery set, complete with a Velcro target, felt-tipped arrows, and a wooden bow, with the goal of providing a fun and interactive activity while also garnering interest in shooting sports in the county. Our activity attracted over **150 people**, with kids and adults alike wanting to give the archery set their best shot! It was a fun day in the Summerfest sun, with many archers in the making!

2025 State Horse Show

In August 2025, **19 Ottawa County 4-H'ers** participated in the State 4-H Show. The three-day event included more than 275 classes in which 4-H members and their projects competed on a statewide basis at the Michigan State University Pavilion for Agriculture and Livestock Education in Lansing.



As a county, **we placed 1st in nine different classes**, 2nd in eight different classes, and 3rd in four different classes. We also had 4-H'ers place top 5 in ten different classes and top 10 in eight different classes. We are proud of our Ottawa County youth and their success at the State Horse Show!

Two Ottawa County youth selected to present at World Food Prize



Eleven 4-H youth (out of 141) were selected from around the state to represent Michigan at the 2025 World Food Prize Global Youth Institute in Des Moines, Iowa, October 21-23. **Two** of those eleven were from Ottawa County. The youth joined leaders from around the world to share their solutions to food insecurity and other challenges being faced globally. Ava Maycroft, a 12th-grade student from Ottawa County, presented her research on the topic of poverty in Honduras, while Gracie Triick, a 12th-grade student from Ottawa County, presented her research on the topic of education in Afghanistan. **We are very proud of these youth and what they have accomplished**.

Ottawa County 4-H'ers Receive Scholarships!

In November 2025, Ottawa County's Gracie Triick was one of 23 students who were awarded a **$2,000 Michigan State University (MSU) Pre-College Scholarship** due to her involvement in the 2025 World Food Prize. Any student who participated in a MSU-sponsored pre-college event was eligible to apply by writing an essay and submitting an application. The scholarship would be applied to Gracie's first year at MSU as a degree-seeking student.

4-H partners with Tractor Supply Company on the spring and fall Paper Clover Campaign, with the intent to support youth with technical and life skills that prepare them for whatever comes their way. With the help of this campaign, **three Ottawa County youth received scholarships** to attend 2025 4-H Exploration Days (pre-college summer program that aims to develop and expand both career and personal interests). Scholarships were also awarded to **6 Ottawa County youth** to attend the Michigan 4-H Dairy Conference where they increased their knowledge of the dairy industry and the issues affecting agriculture both now and in the future.

Beyond Ready



2025 Dairy Days

The 2025 Michigan 4-H Dairy Days event showcased the knowledge, talent and hard work of dairy youth enthusiasts. These youth competed in several educational events that included dairy showmanship, dairy quiz bowl, dairy management and dairy judging; many youth competed in all four contests. **19 Ottawa County 4-H members** attended the competition and competed in the novice, junior, and senior divisions.

Our junior team placed 1st and our senior team placed 3rd in each of the dairy management and dairy judging events. In the dairy quiz bowl event, our novice and junior teams placed 2nd and our senior team placed 3rd.

Michigan Science Olympiad

Ottawa County 4-H joined the Michigan Science Olympiad exhibitor hall at Grand Valley State University, connecting with more than 700 middle and high school students from 37 schools across Ottawa, Kent, and Muskegon counties.

Representing Ottawa County 4-H, Program Coordinator Morgan Mills led an interactive activity challenging students to identify an obscured object using one of their five senses. This demonstrated how scientists use multiple tools to make observations. Morgan also shared the wide range of STEM-focused 4-H programs and opportunities for families to get involved.



Nutrition Programming

768 county residents who participated in health and nutrition programs

1,698 residents positively impacted by the policy, systems, and environmental changes within those PSE sites

11 Nutrition and Physical Activity Policy, Systems and Environmental (PSE) sites receiving PSE education within the county

36 policy, systems, and environmental changes with the PSE sites

Learning Menu Plans



MSU Extension's Amy Prins taught six lessons of the Healthy Choices for Every Body Curriculum at the Love in Action Food Club. Class participants were older adults, most of whom did not regularly plan meals, often because they were cooking for only one or two people. However, most felt they were not meeting recommendations for each food group and agreed they ate more healthfully when they planned meals for their families. The discussion emphasized that meal planning is just as important for one or two people as it is for a family.

Planning ahead can help ensure a balanced diet and adequate intake from each food group.

Woodside Elementary Grow Gardens

The kindergarten classes at Woodside Elementary engaged with the Grow It, Try It, Like It curriculum, which discussed the process of growing foods. However, without an actual garden, the children could only learn about these concepts theoretically, as gardens are typically cultivated during the summer when school is out. With the introduction of grow gardens within the classrooms, the children had the unique opportunity to witness firsthand how vegetables and fruits develop from seeds to harvest. This hands-on experience transformed their learning journey, allowing them to observe the daily progress of the plants and eagerly anticipate the moment they can taste the fruits of their labor.

The excitement in the classroom was palpable, as the children arrived each day with enthusiasm to check on their plants. This direct involvement in nurturing the plants fostered a deeper connection to the food they consumed. The children are more willing to taste and enjoy the produce they have watched grow and helped care for, making the Grow It, Try It, Like It curriculum not only educational but also a delightful and engaging experience.

SNAP-Ed funding cut in 2025



For 30 years, SNAP-Ed helped people build healthy eating habits and be more active on a limited budget. Following a federal decision to end funding, the program was discontinued after July 4, 2025. Through practical, hands-on education and local partnerships, Ottawa County-based Community Nutrition Instructors helped people with limited resources build lifelong skills around nutrition, cooking, physical activity, and budgeting for healthy meals.

Promoting Health and Wellbeing



On September 25, MSU Extension's Kendra Wills and Mariel Borgman volunteered with the Ottawa County Community Action Agency to pack meal boxes for seniors in Ottawa County. Four pallets of boxes were packed to be distributed through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), a federal program that helps supplement the diets of low-income individuals and households by providing them with emergency food assistance at no cost.

Food Safety

In 2025, **199 Ottawa County residents** took classes and accessed resources from MSU Extension's Food Safety Team. These classes covered a variety of topics that helped residents gain the knowledge and training to prevent foodborne illnesses. Some examples of the classes attended include:

- ServSafe®
- Serving up Food Safety
- Michigan Cottage Food Law
- Selling MI Honey & Maple Syrup
- Preserving MI Harvest
- Safe Food Handling for Food Donations
- Moving Beyond Cottage Food
- Food Safety for Food Service Workers
- Safe Food = Healthy Kids

Healthy Aging & Mindfulness

In a continued effort to support physical and mental health in 2025, MSU Extension's health educators reached **282 Ottawa County residents** by offering numerous programs, which explored healthy aging and mindfulness basics. Research has shown that people who are more mindful are generally happier and report less anxiety, symptoms of depression, anger and worries. Some of the session topics included:

- RELAX, Alternatives to Anger
- **SL**eep **E**ducation for **E**veryone **P**rogram (SLEEP)
- Brief Practices in Mindfulness
- Building Resilience to Avoid Burnout
- Changing Negative Self-Talk
- Mindfulness for Better SLEEP
- Be Kind to Your Mind
- Mindfully Feeding Infants/Toddlers
- Mindfulness for Children
- Wits Workout
- Smart Food Choices
- Walk With Ease
- Begin with a Breath
- PATH Toolkit
- Calming Down & Destressing
- Keep Moving to Stay Healthy
- Stress Less With Mindfulness
- Tai Chi for Arthritis and Falls Prevention
- Diabetes 101
- Positive Attitude
- Caring for the Caregiver
- Keys to Embracing Aging
- Mental Health First Aid

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Programs

4-H & Youth
- 4-H Clubs
- 4-H Spin Clubs
- 4-H Capitol Experience
- Leadership Education
- 4-H Exploration Days
- 4-H Shooting Sports
- International Exchanges
- Adulting 101
- Career Preparation/Exploration/Development
- Cash Composition Contest & 4-H Money Smart Contests
- Skillathon
- Wild Spartans
- Summer Garden Programs
- World Food Prize
- Cloverbud Camps
- National 4-H Congress

Food & Health
- Changing Negative Self-Talk
- Cottage Food Law
- Food Preservation
- Food Safety Hotline
- Mindfulness Sessions
- Selling MI Honey & Maple Syrup
- Personal Action Toward Health (PATH)
- Powerful Tools for Caregivers
- ServSafe®
- Sleep Education
- Tai Chi, Matter of Balance for Arthritis & Falls Prevention
- Walk With Ease
- Keys to Embracing Aging
- Wits Workouts
- Safe Food = Healthy Kids
- Mental Health First Aid (Adult, Teen, Youth)
- Michigan Substance Use, Prevention, Education and Recovery (MiSUPER)

Family
- Homeownership Education
- Money Management
- Parenting Education
- RELAX: Alternatives to Anger
- Social & Emotional Health of Young Children
- Foreclosure Education & Counseling

Agriculture Related
- TelFarm
- Agritourism Education
- Beginning Farmer
- Beekeeping Programs & Education
- Cropland & Building Leasing
- Cultivating Local Farm Economics
- Estate & Farm Succession Planning
- Farm Business Organization & Structure
- Farm Financial Performance
- Farm Stress Management
- Field Crop Webinar Series
- Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable & Farm Market Expo
- Heroes to Hives
- Integrated Crop & Pest Management
- Grain Bin & Manure Pit Safety
- MI Ag Ideas to Grow With Conference
- Michigan CSA Network
- Michigan Manure Summit
- On-Farm Educator Visits
- Renewable Energy & Energy Conservation Education
- Virtual Breakfasts
- Christmas Tree Production Education
- Breakfast on the Farm
- Farm to Institution
- Virtual Coffee Break Podcast

Business & Community
- MSU Extension Product Center
- MSU Extension Citizen Planner Program
- New Commissioner Training
- Fiscally Ready Communities
- Veterans Services

Lawn & Garden
- Ask Extension
- Lawn & Garden Hotline
- Foundations of Gardening/MSU Extension Master Gardener Program
- Smart Gardening Soil Testing

Natural Resources
- Clean Boats, Clean Waters
- Introduction to Lakes Online
- Michigan Birding
- Algae 101
- Michigan Master Naturalist
- Michigan Paddle Stewards
- Wild About: Conservation Webinar Series
- Michigan Conservation Stewards
- Septic System Program
- Natural Shoreline Education

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