I am delighted to share a snapshot of results from another successful year of partnership between St. Joseph County and Michigan State University (MSU) Extension. Because of your continued support, we’ve been able to make a difference in the lives of youth, families, businesses, and communities.

MSU Extension offers a broad range of research-based educational services to county residents. Over this past year, we’ve empowered families and individuals to live healthier lives, created opportunities for youth leadership development, helped farmers with business management and mental health, and provided technical training to community leaders. Our staff live and work alongside county residents, are rooted in community relationships, and are responsive to community needs.

We have many partners helping us fulfill our mission in St. Joseph County and are grateful to the Fair Board, Farm Bureau, Conservation District, County Parks, Juvenile Court, Glen Oaks Community College, ISD public schools, Master Gardener 4-H volunteers, local businesses, and so many others. On behalf of the team serving St. Joseph County, thank you for another great year. We look forward to your continued support and hope to see you at an upcoming program!

Julie Pioch, District Director

Michigan State University Extension helps people improve their lives through an educational process that applies knowledge to critical issues, needs and opportunities.

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Lessons taught by Linda Kline enhanced the messages from the Family & Consumer Sciences curriculum in Three Rivers. Students enjoyed the interactive sessions with her, especially the physical activity breaks and the fun group competitions.”

Cathy Phillips, Three Rivers Middle School

NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY EDUCATION HIGHLIGHTS

A pilot program took place with two third grade classes from the Eastwood Elementary School in Sturgis. The Show Me Nutrition curriculum was a six-week series that followed the Ag-Citing Experience program which took place earlier at the St. Joseph County Grange Fair. Students received nutrition education from the curriculum called Building My Body. The lessons increased their knowledge of the 5 food groups, the digestive system, reading food labels, calorie intake, fighting the fat in fast foods, and increasing physical activity while reducing screen time. Students enjoyed the physical activity breaks that took place and learned new ways to make eating healthier fun. Teachers from Sturgis said the students enjoyed hands-on activities to learn about counting calories and reading labels. They also learned how to avoid germs and wash their hands to help stay healthy.

More new programming for SNAP education also occurred with Three Rivers Middle School. Ninety students from the 6th and 8th grade Family and Consumer Science classes participated in a six-week education series. The lessons and hands-on activities taught students about dietary guidelines for teenagers, the benefits of eating healthy and being physically active. Food safety practices to prevent food borne illnesses were covered. Students used educational materials to compare and select healthier food choices for their dietary needs, along with re-thinking their drink options to reduce sugar intake. Increasing physical activity while reducing time spent on technical devices was discussed to improve their overall health.

In total, 1068 youth and 341 adults participated in SNAP-Ed programs in 2019.

Ag-citing is in its 29th year and occurs each year in coordination with the St. Joseph County Grange Fair. The program brings school age youth to the fair grounds to learn about agriculture, food and nutrition. This program is an MSU Extension team effort with SNAP Education Community Nutrition Instructors, Agriculture educators and Master Gardener Volunteers all pitching in with community volunteers and school personnel to make the event a success.

“My daughter and I really enjoyed learning about the animals on our Ag-Citing tour. We especially liked the “farm to table” exhibit and presentation. My daughter was surprised to actually learn where some of her food comes from!”

Matie James, St. Joseph County
Program Highlights

TRAINING LOCAL DECISION MAKERS

MSU Extension’s government and community vitality team engages participants in learning good governance and how to collaborate on solving complex issues in order to improve their communities. Participants leave their educational programs with a deeper understanding of civic roles and responsibilities, increased confidence to make decisions, skills and information to better manage community resources, knowledge of how to implement best practices, and an understanding of the importance of building quality places in Michigan. Programs attended by St. Joseph leaders in 2019 included a session hosted by the South Central Regional Planning Agency on Planning and Zoning Implications of Alternative Energy and one of the Fiscal Ready Communities regional workshops taught in partnership with the Michigan Department of Treasury. Local governments experience fiscal stress regularly. Increased prioritization of fiscal sustainability, long-term planning, and appropriate financial policies helps to promote fiscal health and position local governments to support thriving communities. The workshop on fiscal sustainability included understanding local unit fiscal health, building long-term planning into the budget process, and best practices for financial policies.

The Land Division Act is one of the most widely misunderstood and applied state laws in Michigan. Few organizations offer training on this and MSUE’s training has come to be seen as the best program on the topic. Offered annually in conjunction with the State Tax Commission, this program offers assessors continuing education hours toward their state license. Ninety-seven people were trained in 2019, including four from St. Joseph county.

HEALTHY LAKES & ECOSYSTEMS

Introduction to Lakes is an intensive six-week online course specially designed for those interested in learning about inland lakes, and in which participants explore topics including lake ecology, watersheds, natural shorelines, water law, aquatic plants, and citizen involvement. A total of 159 people took the course in 2019, including one from St. Joseph County. On-line sessions are accompanied by three live-streaming Ask an Expert sessions with MSU Extension educators.

The Cooperative Lakes Monitoring Program had 422 citizen scientists enrolled in 2019, including 9 from St. Joseph County. This program is a partnership between MSU Extension, Michigan Lakes and Streams Association and MDEQ. It is designed to provide resources and assistance to riparians and volunteers to be able to scientifically monitor the health of their local lakes.

EMERGENCY PLANNING FOR AFRICAN SWINE FEVER (AFS)

In early 2019, MSU Extension, Michigan Pork Producers Association and Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development teamed up to address an important topic for pork producers in the St Joseph County area: African Swine Fever. This meeting focused on protecting the health of Michigan's pork industry, specifically from foreign animal disease (FAD), including the very real threat of AFS. Pork producers heard from a number of experts regarding FAD and how to best be prepared for an outbreak. Information shared included the likelihood of an outbreak in the United States and what protocols would be put in place if an outbreak occurred. MSU Extension experts led an interactive session on preparing for continued production if there was an outbreak, on Secure Pork Supply Planning and on business continuity. Pork producers were able to walk away from this meeting with a better understanding of what will happen if there is a case of AFS identified in Michigan, including how farms will be quarantined, what will be required for a ‘movement of animals’ permit if in an infected area, and the role of the biosecurity manager on the farm. Attendees indicated they had a better understanding of the importance of biosecurity and planning for an FAD outbreak.

4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

In 2019, 4-H youth development programs in the county continued to focus in the areas of leadership, agriculture, financial literacy, and life skills. 2402 youth participated in programs with 915 of those youth enrolled in yearlong community clubs. We are proud to say that MSUE youth programs reached 19% of the youth the population in the county. 259 adult 4-H volunteers were active this past year.
GROWER EDUCATION & SUPPORT

Agriculture is a key economic driver in St. Joseph County. In 2019, MSU Extension provided relevant and timely information to growers through on-farm research and demonstration projects, on-line workshops and interactive meetings. Spring weather conditions forced MSUE field crops educators to focus their attention on helping farmers struggling with planting and harvesting decisions. Online resources and production models were provided to help producers make critical business decisions. In August, 42 farmers and agribusiness professionals attended a crop production and irrigation research field day in Sturgis. The program included results from research funded by the Michigan Soybean Promotion Committee (MSPC) on the impact of applying rhizobium to soybeans post-emergence, a demonstration project to show the utility of using UAV’s to detect problems with center-pivot irrigation equipment, and presentations by MSUE specialists and educators on other research related to the late planting season. MSU educators reached out to St. Joseph growers via videos, electronic newsletters and timely articles published in print and on the Internet to keep them up-to-date on the latest research, best practices, and weather conditions impacting their crops.

With the multitude of issues faced by today’s farmers, including a declining farm economy and unpredictable weather patterns, farm stress and farmer suicide are serious issues that received attention in 2019. A multi-disciplinary MSU team developed resources to support farmers, their families, and those who work with farmers.

USE OF COVER CROPS ON THE RISE

The MSUE Cover Crop/Soil Health Team has been collaborating for years to increase the awareness and adoption of cover crops in Michigan by conducting research, holding field days, workshops, developing presentations, factsheets, bulletins, podcasts, and videos. This work has resulted in an increase in cover crop use in Michigan and the county as measured by the National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS) ag census.

Starting in 2012, and again in 2017, cover crop use was included in the NASS census. The 2017 data was released in 2019 and revealed an increase in cover crop adoption over time. Data showed that Michigan ranked 8th in the nation in 2017, up 54% since 2012. St. Joseph County ranked second in the state (after Huron) with the most acreage planted, with 58,319 cover crop acres on 27.5% of its agricultural land. This is an increase of 25,800 acres in five years.

Many partner agencies have worked with MSU to promote the benefits of cover crops, such as the Midwest Cover Crops Council, USDA NRCS, Michigan Conservation Districts, Soil Health Institute, Soil Health Partnership, and conservation and farmer organizations.

Research has shown that cover crops improve soil productivity, and increase crop resilience under extreme weather conditions. Several MSU departments and innovative Michigan farmers have contributed to this body of knowledge.

“The significant growth in cover crops acreage is contributing to rebuilding Michigan’s soil health and protecting its waters,” said Paul Gross, Michigan State University Extension educator. “Continuing and accelerating this growth will take coordinated efforts between farmers, researchers, educators, partner organizations and agencies.”

Soil health has been declining in Michigan through the years. Tillage and the lack of living roots for 6 months or more through the year have contributed to this decline. Michigan farmers have increased their awareness of the effect that soil health has on their productivity, resilience to climate changes, and environmental stewardship. The use of cover crops rotations is one practice for improving soil health and contributing to the sustainability of agriculture within Michigan.

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