

BENZIE COUNTY 2024-2025 ANNUAL REPORT

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Message from the District Director

I'm excited to share the results of another successful year of partnership between Benzie County and Michigan State University (MSU) Extension. Thanks to your ongoing support, we've been able to make a meaningful impact on the lives of youth, families, businesses, and communities throughout the county.

MSU Extension continues to offer a wide array of research-based educational outreach to our residents. Over the past year, we've empowered individuals and families to lead healthier lives, supported local and new businesses, provided opportunities for youth leadership development and career exploration, assisted farmers with business management and mental health support, and so much more. Our team lives and works alongside county residents, building strong community relationships and staying responsive to local needs.

We remain committed to delivering our programs in personalized formats and locations that are convenient and accessible to our participants. This ongoing success is possible because of our strong partnership with you. On behalf of the MSU Extension team serving Benzie County, thank you for another outstanding year. We look forward to your continued support and hope you will join us in our upcoming programs.

Jennifer Berkey
District 3 Director

Impact



190

Programs accessed by residents



1,742

Reached through programming



23,923

Reached by social media

AGRICULTURE PROGRAM



NWMHRC BUS TOUR

The Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Center (NWMHRC) was proud to be a stop on the inaugural Michigan State University Spartan Bus Tour on October 22, 2024. The tour was hosted by MSU President Kevin Guskiewicz, a neuroscientist and concussion research leader who joined MSU in March 2024. He came to us from the University of North Carolina, and in keeping with a tradition he started there, he hosted a bus trip through a slice of Michigan for 60 MSU faculty and staff.

NWMHRC was honored to be selected as a stop to share the latest in tree fruit research with the group.

Heather Leach led a lab tour and shared updates on the entomology research she is conducting in NW Michigan. Erin Lauwers, IPM Educator, led a wagon tour and explained various research trials that are going on in the field. Board members Mark Miezio and Bruce Veliquette offered valuable insights into the complexities of

cherry production, helping connect visitors, many new to agriculture, with the region’s unique challenges. Both of our board members did a terrific job, and their messages were engaging, insightful, and delivered from the heart. Their information really resonated with the group, and there was a plethora of interesting and engaging questions from the audience.

Thanks to everyone who contributed to make our bus tour stop a success! It was a fantastic opportunity to share the impactful work happening in Northwest Michigan with the broader MSU community.

INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT UPDATES

These updates feature timely discussions of pest challenges and management options dictated by weather and pest biology. Attendees are encouraged to bring examples of pests and damage found on the farm for identification and

discussion. Additionally, we host invited speakers from local organizations and Michigan State University. Updates were held bi-weekly in Grand Traverse, Antrim and Benzie Counties. A virtual option was also available during Wednesday meetings.



AGRICULTURE PROGRAM



*Year-end tax estimate meetings provided farmers with the opportunity to save nearly **\$54,000**, allowing for investment back into the farm business to help build farm resilience.*



FARM BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Farm Business Management Educator Chris Bardenhagen works with area farmers on succession planning, financial management, and cost of production budgeting – both at the individual level and across the broader industry. In 2024, Chris assisted nine area farms with TelFarm program outreach, helping to determine end-of-year tax strategies and annual balance sheet analysis. Farmers who participate in the program gain a greater understanding of their farm’s financial strengths and weaknesses and how they can improve upon their financial standing.

These farms represent about \$5 million in sales in 2024. Despite a challenging year for many farms, year-end tax estimate meetings provided farmers with the opportunity to save nearly \$54,000. Strategizing on year-end taxes goes beyond saving money—it can also support investments and upgrades in equipment and infrastructure, boosting the farm’s

long-term resilience. Succession planning was another key focus this year. Chris worked closely with more than 10 families as they navigated important decisions about transferring their farms, a topic that continues to gain interest among producers. He also helped organize a well-attended seminar in partnership with Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, drawing in more than 40 attendees. The workshop featured presentations on the structure of the planning process, legal instruments including trusts, and critical considerations necessary for advancing a farm succession plan. Related topics included the use of conservation easements in estate planning and the role of Michigan Farm Link in connecting land-seeking farmers with landowners. Succession planning tools and resources help farm families to make informed choices to successfully transfer business knowledge, responsibilities, and assets to the next generation of farmers.

In 2024, Chris also continued work on cost of production studies that provide tools to area growers. This year work was done to

develop cost budgets for peaches, apples, and blueberries, and work began on a new cost study for chestnuts, a promising crop for former tart cherry sites. Through his efforts, Chris provides essential resources that help farmers strengthen their businesses, plan for the future, and remain competitive in a rapidly evolving agricultural landscape.



*9 area farms
representing nearly
\$5 million in revenue in
2024*

AGRICULTURE PROGRAM



2024 saw an increase of **1,130 Farm Stress** participants, representing a **131% increase**



FARM STRESS & AgrAbility

Michigan AgrAbility empowers individuals in the agricultural industry to continue working despite injury, illness, or disability. The program’s mission is to enhance quality of life for farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural workers with disabilities, so that they, their families, and their communities continue to succeed in rural America. In 2024, the program served 212 clients and reached 7,725 people through workshops and trainings, with 428 direct interactions across the state.

Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS) supported clients by providing \$368,590 in funding for assistive technology projects, benefiting 23 farm clients. Community partnerships also played a vital role—Alpha Gamma Rho’s (AGR) Tau Chapter at MSU contributed \$37,000 in 2024, surpassing \$150,000 in total donations since 2013. The February Beef Preview event continues to be a major fundraiser, directly supporting technology solutions for small farms and independent growers.

AgrAbility also collaborated with MSU’s College of Engineering for Design Day. In Spring 2024, students created a portable swarm trap hive lifter for a disabled

veteran beekeeper and Heroes to Hives instructor. In the fall, they developed a mechanized kneeler cart for a client with severe foot pain to tend rows of low growing plants, which won the Edison Award for Best Design Project. Free downloadable design plans for both projects are available at www.canr.msu.edu/agrability.

In July, AgrAbility hosted a Regional Training Workshop in Ann Arbor with national staff and 44 participants from across the U.S. and beyond. This hands-on event strengthened the broader AgrAbility network and promoted greater understanding of assistive technology in agriculture.

MANAGING FARM STRESS AT MSU EXTENSION

Farming is inherently demanding. From job-related injuries to volatile commodity prices, Michigan’s agricultural community faces significant stress. Whether stemming from financial pressures or everyday hardships, MSU Extension is here to help.

In 2024, the Managing Farm Stress team delivered 45 programs reaching 1,992 people—more than double any year outside of 2023. This marks a 131%

increase from 2022, highlighting the program’s growing reach and effectiveness.

A major milestone this year was the creation of the MSU Farm Stress Endowment, approved by the Board of Trustees in December 2024. With seed funding from Cherry Republic, this endowment ensures long-term support for Michigan’s agricultural community.

Free counseling with farm-informed therapists and financial assistance for those in Michigan Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries is available. Learn more or access support at: https://www.canr.msu.edu/managing_farm_stress/teletherapy-program

Farming is tough, but you don’t have to do it alone. MSU Extension stands by farmers and is ready to support you.

Managing Farm Stress



45 programs



1,992 participants



546 Extension Master Gardener Hours volunteered, valued at **\$18,285**

These hours were dedicated to educating residents and preserving the natural resources of Benzie County



EXTENSION
MASTER GARDENER

This year, through volunteer outreach, MSU Extension Master Gardeners (EMGs) continued to share science-based gardening knowledge, engaged citizens and empowered communities in environmentally responsible gardening practices.

In 2024, MSU EMGs volunteered for 546 hours in Benzie County, a time contribution valued at \$18,285. EMG Volunteer activities impacted county residents by improving quality of life, empowering youth, protecting waterways, and improving food security.

Providing flowering plants to support butterflies, bees, and other pollinators was also the focus of several projects in 2024. Pollinator planters in downtown Frankfort were maintained by EMG Volunteers and invited visitors to learn about pollinators by participating in a citizen science project. Last year, during 72 citizen scientist observations, over 300 pollinators were recorded visiting flowers

in Frankfort’s flower planters.

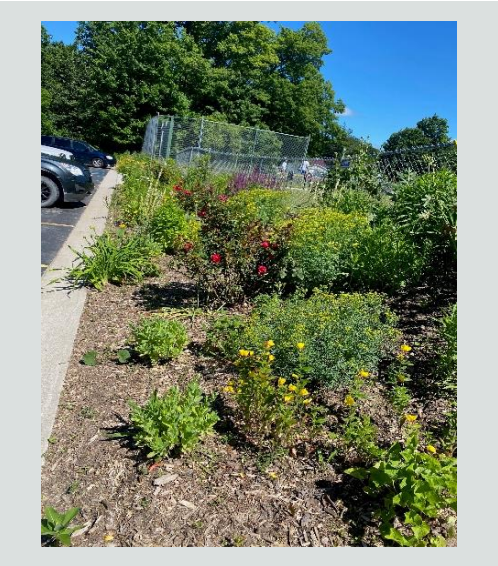
In Benzonia this year, MSU Extension Master Gardener Volunteers, in partnership with SEEDS, hosted Benzie Central Middle School students from the SEEDS EcoSchool program at the Mills Community House gardens. During six consecutive weekly visits, students learned about plants, gardening, and pollinator conservation, while working in the gardens alongside MSU Extension Master Gardener volunteers.

County residents are always welcome to call, visit, or email the MSU Extension office for assistance with horticultural issues.

Additionally, MSU Consumer Horticulture staff and MSU Extension Master Gardener Volunteers hosted a plant diagnostic clinic at the Benzonia Library every second Tuesday of the month May through October of 2024. Residents were welcomed to bring samples of plants, insects, diseases and other problems; MSU Extension staff and Master Gardener volunteers provided the

expertise to diagnose problems and provide management recommendations for 35 county residents.

In addition, Benzie County residents were able to receive answers to their horticultural questions by using either the online service Ask Extension or MSU Extension’s statewide Lawn and Garden Hotline (1-888-678-3464), which are hosted by teams of MSU specialists, educators, and MSU Extension Master Gardener Volunteers.



AGRITOURISM



“This was a phenomenal summit. The organizers did a great job of bringing so many voices and perspectives to the table from many key facets of this multidimensional industry.”

-Agritourism Summit attendee

AGRITOURISM SUMMIT

MSU Extension, in partnership with local leaders, proudly hosted the first-ever Agritourism Summit on May 7 – 8, 2024. This exciting event brought together farmers, elected officials, and community members from across Michigan to explore how supporting on-farm tourism and small businesses can strengthen rural communities. Through presentations, tours, and discussions, the summit showcased how agritourism can create jobs, attract visitors, and build stronger connections between agriculture and the public. It also emphasized the role of agritourism in preserving farmland, celebrating local culture, and boosting the long-term success of rural communities.

The two-day event kicked off with a guided bus tour through the Grand Traverse region, where 65 participants visited several agritourism spots, including Jacob’s Farm, Leelanau Cheese, Tandem Ciders, and Nine Bean Rows. The tour concluded with a celebratory soiree at Farm Club in Leelanau County, where attendees enjoyed locally grown food and spent the evening building relationships and sharing ideas.

On May 8, the Agritourism Summit convened 165 participants from 32 Michigan counties at The Hagerty Center in Traverse City. The day was filled with panel discussions that featured a wide range of speakers, including local farmers, city officials, and experts from MSU Extension. Panelists openly shared their real-life experiences, the good and the challenging, giving attendees a deeper understanding of how agritourism really works. Within MSU Extension, teams from the Community, Food & Environment Institute (CFEI), the Agriculture and Agribusiness Institute (AABI), and the Health and Nutrition Institute (HNI) worked closely together to make the event a success.

“The tour of the various farms was eye opening. Size didn’t matter-being creative, willing to take a leap of faith, and working within agritourism made the difference.”

-Agritourism Summit attendee

Presentations addressed critical topics such as farm stress, entrepreneurship, rural economics, the Michigan Right to Farm Act, and the evolving landscape of local policy and regulation.

Evaluation results reflected the summit’s strong impact:

- **85%** of participants reported a better understanding of the needs of farmers, elected officials, or others working in agritourism
- **88%** felt their knowledge was enhanced in ways that will help them be more effective in their roles
- **91%** said they plan to apply what they learned to future decision-making

Following the success and excitement of the first summit, MSU Extension is thrilled to announce that the next Agritourism Summit will be held in Antrim County in 2026! Plans are already in progress to engage local partners, showcase regional agritourism businesses, and strengthen collaboration between farmers, policymakers, and community leaders.



PLANNING COMMISSION ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Mary Reilly, Government and Public Policy Educator, offered a Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities training to Inland Township Planning Commission in September 2024. This interactive course helps new and experienced Planning Commissioners gain confidence in their roles as stewards of local planning and zoning.

A similar training was offered to the Thompsonville-Colfax Joint Planning Commission (JPC). In a gesture of inter-jurisdictional cooperation, Planning Commissioners Lake, Inland, and Joyfield Townships also participated in the training and share the cost.

RENEWABLE ENERGY

Act 233 brought changes to renewable energy permitting in Michigan, including an option for state-level land use decisions for utility-scale projects. MSU Extension provides programming designed to help local communities weigh the pros

and cons of various regulatory options and build capacity for decision making.

GOVERNING ESSENTIALS

Governing Essentials is a three-part webinar series including Open Meetings Act, Parliamentary Procedures, and Components of Extraordinary Boards. Interest in board training is on the rise. This series (or parts of it) can be offered locally.

BENZIE SHORES LIBRARY – CIVICS SERIES

The Benzie Shores District Library (Frankfort) invited MSU Extension to be a part of their new Civics series to help patrons increase knowledge of basic governmental principals and functions. MSU Extension offered trainings on the Michigan Open Meetings Act and Introduction to Planning and Zoning (both about 1.5 hours).

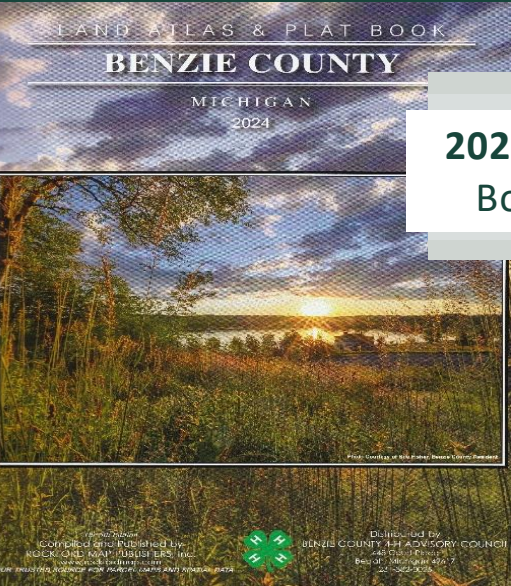
NEW COMMISSIONER SCHOOL

New Commissioner School (NCS) 2024 provided fundamental education for new

and veteran county commissioners. The program helped participants explore governance complexities, understand their roles, learn about county finance, and develop strategies for effective decision-making and collaboration. The 2024 NCS includes self-paced online modules or live webinars in November, followed by full day in-person workshops in December. One commissioner from Benzie County attended NCS in 2024.

MASTER CITIZEN PLANNER (MCP)

Benzie County has two Master Citizen Planners, people who have completed the Citizen Planner course and passed an exam. MCP's are committed to 6 hours of continuing education each year to stay current on the latest in planning and zoning.



2024 Benzie County Plat Book Available Now!



155 Youth Soccer Players
18 Teams ~ 20 Coaches



PLAT BOOKS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

In recent years, the relevance of the 4-H Plat Book fundraiser has been questioned, as digital tools and broader Wi-Fi access have made land and navigation data more available.

Is the plat book still a viable fundraiser in today’s digital age? Based on a recent experience—yes.

A gentleman visited the Benzie Government Center seeking a map of seasonal roads. He and his partner were planning a self-guided backroads fall color tour and needed reliable navigation resources. He was referred to the MSU Extension office.

After asking about the large county map outside our office, we introduced him to the 4-H Plat Book. He expressed concerns about inconsistent scales in other plat books, and we assured him that ours—produced with county GIS data and printed by Rockford Map Publishers—is known for accuracy and consistency.

We pointed out the appendices with parcel

ownership details and comprehensive road listings. Impressed, he purchased a copy on the spot.

Aligning future publication dates with key seasonal events like hunting season and fall color tours could help maximize visibility and fundraising potential.

PATHWAY TO VARSITY: 4-H SOCCER PARTNERSHIP

Efforts to build a collaborative partnership between the Benzie Central Middle and High School Soccer programs and the 4-H Soccer Program have been underway for several years. Initial discussions began in late 2020, when Varsity Head Coach Batchelder expressed interest in developing the 4-H program as a feeder system for Benzie Central’s teams. However, communication stalled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors.

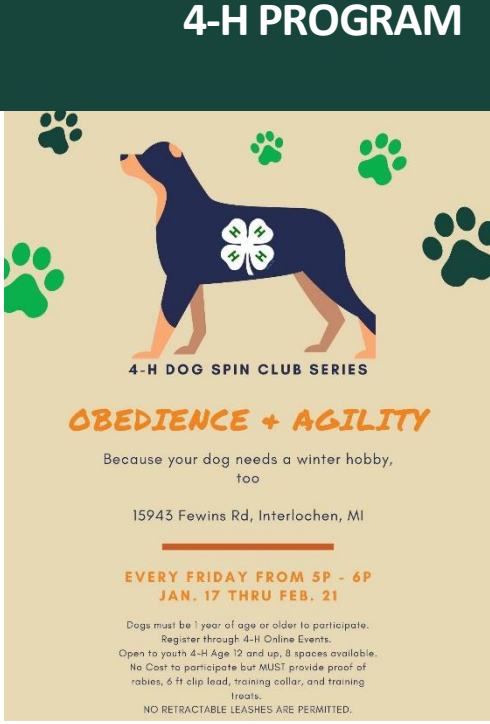
In fall 2022, the 4-H Soccer Program was restructured to prioritize smaller team sizes, age-appropriate fields and goals, and development-focused learning objectives, including sportsmanship, teamwork, soccer skills, and healthy habits.

Coach Batchelder reconnected in April 2024, and a meeting was held to revisit the partnership. He expressed strong support for the program’s updates, which aligned closely with his own team’s recommendations. The meeting also provided an opportunity to address past tensions between the programs.

Coach Batchelder committed to having himself and his coaching staff complete the Volunteer Selection Process (VSP), enabling 4-H to promote off-season K–8 skills camps and strengthen ties with Benzie Central Soccer. A proposal was also discussed to require Varsity players to coach or referee in the 4-H program as a condition for earning their Varsity letter.

Additional discussions included potential cooperative efforts with Frankfort-Elberta Schools and New Covenant Christian Academy (NCCA) to offer advanced soccer opportunities for students at schools without stand-alone programs.

The 4-H Soccer Program looks forward to working with Coach Batchelder and Benzie Central to strengthen and unify local youth soccer.



PROGRAM GROWTH

The Benzie-Manistee 4-H Program continues to grow which means a need for more volunteers, more clubs, and more space.

A local homeschool group, of current and/or former Benzie 4-H soccer participants, expressed an interest in animals, agriculture, and homesteading. This curiosity led to the formation of a brand-new Manistee County 4-H Club.

Two dedicated parents stepped forward to lead the club, first contacting our office just before one of our 4-H staff members began maternity leave. Although their volunteer processing was delayed due to staff availability, both leaders remained committed to the process. Their patience and perseverance paid off—they completed the volunteer screening, were approved, and held their first official club meeting, where youth selected a club name and completed their chartering paperwork.

Balancing youth voice with a club leader's vision is always a fun and meaningful

process. In this case, while one leader, Becky, hoped the club would settle on a name like *Northern Homesteaders*, the youth ultimately had other ideas. Influenced—perhaps with some encouragement from the dads that were present—they enthusiastically chose the name *Cross County Cluckers*.

Now officially chartered just before Thanksgiving, the “Cluckers” include 4-H’ers from across the region—from Honor to nearly Wellston. While their shared background is in 4-H soccer, their interests have expanded into poultry and companion animals. Their story highlights the evolving interests of our youth and the importance of offering diverse, accessible pathways within the 4-H program.

We’re excited to see what the Cross County Cluckers will accomplish and are grateful for the dedicated volunteers who make growth like this possible.

FAIR DOG WINS AT NORTHWEST MICHIGAN FAIR

Amelia joined Benzie 4-H in the summer of

2023 when her family was on vacation from their primary residence in Pennsylvania. She participated in a 4-H Dog SPIN Club and returned to the program in summer of 2024 and another SPIN Club and new NWM Fair Experience.

In their second year, Amelia took 2nd place in agility (first place was 1/2 second faster!!), 2nd in rally, reserve grand champion in rally and 1st in obedience.



SNAP-ED PROGRAM



The Gathering Place
receives
\$1500 grant



"We are so grateful for this. The old equipment was falling apart and wasn't safe for seniors. Our folks love sitting out on the patio. And anyone can sit there – the chairs move so people in wheelchairs can be right at the table with their friends."

- Susan Glass, Senior Center Director



ENHANCING ACCESS TO FRESH PRODUCE AT THE GATHERING PLACE

Policy, system, and environmental changes are a way of making sustainable changes within our community so that healthy choices are available to all community members. These changes help to improve places where people live, learn, work, play, eat, and worship. MSU Extension works closely with area partners to help write guidelines, alter the way things are done, and improve spaces so all people can be supported in leading a healthful life.

Staff at Benzie Senior Resources and The Gathering Place worked with MSU Extension and two grant efforts to help increase the variety of fresh fruits and vegetables available for older adults in Benzie County.

Through a \$1,500 grant provided by MSU Extension, The Gathering Place was able to acquire new knives and an updated fruit and vegetable chopper with various cutting and slicing implements. Having faster and easier-to-use kitchen equipment means more variety of fruits and vegetables available for older people to enjoy and nourish their bodies.

The Gathering Place expanded their dining facilities by improving their outdoor seating area. MSU Extension assisted in procuring \$8,100 from The Home Depot Foundation to purchase new outdoor, accessible seating. The donation also helped to enhance the outdoor space by providing gardening materials and potted plants for the serenity garden at The Gathering Place. This new seating area was used by 80-100 people each week, through the months of June, July, and August.

"The new equipment has helped a lot. We've had to do a little bit of training, but it's been useful. We use it for our salad bar a lot, as well as other foods, like veggie lasagna. With the new veggie chopper and knives, food preparation has gone a lot more smoothly. It's more efficient and quicker, too. And easier for our staff to use. There's more variety of fresh stuff on the salad bar because we can chop a bunch of different things now."

-David Main, Executive Chef at The Gathering Place

SNAP-ED PROGRAM



20 participants receive nutritious food, recipes, and educational materials each month

RED FOOD BAG PROGRAM

The Red Food Bag Program is a collaborative effort among Benzie Senior Resources, Benzie Area Christian Neighbors (BACN), and Michigan State University (MSU) Extension.

This initiative delivers food bags twice each month to homebound older adults in Benzie County. The bags are packed by BACN volunteers and distributed through the Meals on Wheels program by Benzie Senior Resources. Each delivery also includes educational materials developed by MSU Extension, focusing on nutrition, physical activity, and mental health.

Currently, the program serves 20 participants, providing not only consistent access to nutritious food but also resources that support overall well-being.

The Red Food Bag Program continues to evolve in response to participant needs. Menus are regularly updated and adjusted to allow individuals to choose the foods they receive, ensuring both relevance and

satisfaction. Recipes are included for less familiar produce items, such as parsnips, to help recipients make the most of the fresh foods provided.

In addition, each month features a highlighted health topic designed to promote healthy habits. Topics have included goal setting, the importance of

staying hydrated, and different types of physical activity appropriate for older adults.

Through this integrated approach, the Red Food Bag Program fosters greater food security while empowering older adults to maintain healthier, more active lifestyles.

Snap-Ed Impacts in Benzie County



4 Sites receiving nutrition or physical activity through Policy, System, or Environmental Education



12 Policy, Systems, or Environmental changes at those sites



500 People impacted by sites receiving nutrition or physical activity through Policy, Systems, or Environmental Education

PRODUCT CENTER

SEAGRANT

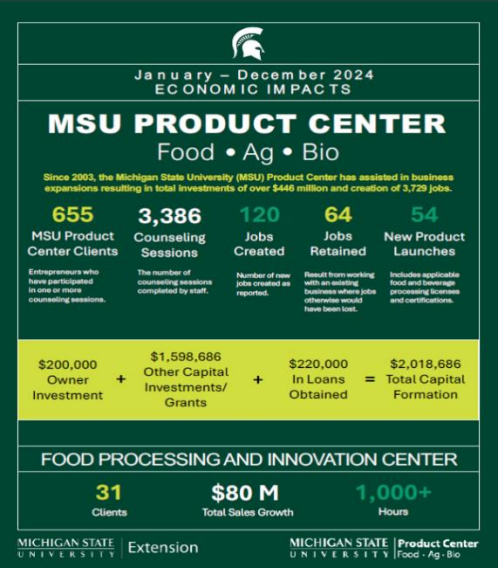
PRODUCT CENTER
IMPACTS IN
BENZIE COUNTY

5 businesses

5 counseling Hours

Over \$750,000 in annual
sales (combined)

16 total employees



MSU PRODUCT CENTER
BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

The Michigan State University Product Center supports entrepreneurs in Northwest Michigan who are launching or growing businesses in food and agriculture. From farm-based products to value-added goods, the center provides expert guidance through business planning, market research and feasibility analysis.

Through its Traverse City-based innovation counselor, the Product Center offers personalized guidance to help local entrepreneurs turn ideas into viable products and services.

By fostering local business development, the Product Center plays a key role in strengthening the regional economy and building a resilient, community-based food system.

CONNECTING
ENTREPRENEURIAL
COMMUNITIES CONFERENCE

Held May 30-31, 2024 in Cadillac, the annual Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities (CEC) Conference brought together 111 attendees from across the state, including 21 from Northwest Michigan, to explore strategies for building resilient local economies.

Designed to support chambers of commerce, downtown development authorities, municipal leaders, and economic development professionals, the conference focused on practical approaches for strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems through community collaboration and place-based innovation.

SEA GRANT

In 2024, the Michigan Sea Grant Extension program continued its mission to deliver high-impact outreach and education, supporting Great Lakes stewardship across coastal communities—including Manistee County and the surrounding region. With its mission to bring science to the shoreline, Michigan Sea Grant led a variety of initiatives focused on environmental resilience, water quality, and sustainable use of Great Lakes resources.

A key highlight of the year was the Freshwater Summit, held in October of 2024, where over 85 people gathered for a full day of presentations and dialogue on critical regional water issues. Topics included Grand Traverse Bay fisheries and ongoing Lake Whitefish restoration, updates on the FishPass project at Union Street Dam, and a broader view of Great Lakes ecosystem challenges. The event provided a valuable opportunity for local leaders, researchers, and residents to engage with cutting-edge science and policy developments.

Sea Grant also advanced its work on shoreline

What's behind the decline in northern Michigan's whitefish population?

by Trevor Roubadeaux | Mon, August 5th 2024 at 9:33 AM
Updated Mon, August 5th 2024 at 6:47 PM



stewardship and marina sustainability, including support for the Clean Marinas Program. This included the use of innovative tools like the PixieDrone and BeBot beach robot, which help remove macroplastics from beaches before they break down into harmful microplastics. These efforts directly support cleaner, healthier recreational and working waterfronts.

In addition to public events and field work, Sea Grant Extension professionals were a trusted resource for residents, answering questions on a wide range of topics from invasive species and boat wash stations to fluctuating lake levels, erosion, fisheries trends, and resilient shoreline development. These efforts ensure that Great Lakes communities, including those in Benzie County, have access to the best available science and practical guidance to support sustainable, thriving shorelines.



BEBOT & PIXIE DRONE

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