



# Branch County 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

## MESSAGE FROM THE DISTRICT DIRECTOR



Michigan State University Extension (MSUE) brings the science, programs and resources of Michigan's land grant university to organizations, communities and individuals throughout the state. Our outreach and engagement is built on a local basis, thanks to our county partnerships and more than 600 faculty and staff in offices across all 83 counties.

Historically, our relationships have been maintained through in-person meetings and programs. Over the last few years we have built up the breadth and quality of our website at [extension.msu.edu](http://extension.msu.edu), which now averages 1.25 million visitors per month. In 2020, we expanded our capacity to provide high-quality virtual education.

2020 will be a year to remember for many reasons (several of which we will want to forget). The creativeness, dedication, teamwork, and resilience that our MSUE professionals exhibited during this global pandemic will be something I will always remember. This has been a difficult time for communities, families and staff, and I am proud of the work we have done to continue to provide high-quality educational programs throughout my district.

Forced to pivot to online programming, our staff were given an opportunity to do something they have wanted to do for a long time - convert their in-person programming to a digital format. Digital formats don't work for everybody or every program, but to expand our reach and help more people incorporate the evidence-based learning from a major university into their homes, families, businesses and communities has always been a goal worth pursuing. Many were moving in that direction already; the pandemic required us to move there faster.

Working from home with the tools and support needed to help them succeed in a remote environment, MSUE educators have continued to assist farmers through the growing season, elected officials and decision makers, parents, families and youth by meeting with them on virtual platforms through online meetings and webinars. With the work they have accomplished over the last months, staff reported to me that they have learned that:

- Programs that are produced for a live audience and recorded allow more people to view the meetings in a time convenient for them;
- We are reaching audiences that would not be able to attend our programs in the past because of time, travel and disability;
- We are reaching local, regional, state, national and global audiences;
- We are able to share our expertise, ideas and best practices more efficiently across the state;
- A digital divide still exists, not all programs work in an on-line format, and nothing will replace our local, face to face, relationship- based work.

In the end, I believe the experience in on-line program development and investment in capacity will not only augment but strengthen our face to face work (once that resumes). Our programs will have greater reach than ever before and MSUE will be a leader in virtual education.

Please contact me for more information and thank you for your continued support!

*Julie Pioch, District Director*

## LOCAL STAFF

- Connie Lange—4-H Program Coordinator
- Val Albright—Community Nutrition Instructor
- Dave Thompson—Swine Educator
- Paola Bacigulapo Sanguesa – Dairy Educator
- Tamra Bildner—Secretary/Office Manager

## CONTACT

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## 4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT HIGHLIGHTS

In 2019, MSU Extension's youth development program reached 10% of the county youth population in Branch County. A total of 835 young people were enrolled in community clubs, 145 adult leader volunteers and 37 youth leaders participated in programs teaching and mentoring our youth. The Branch County 4-H Leaders Council and 4-H Foundation provide leadership, advice and funding to the county program.

Beginning in March, 2020, all 4-H events; clubs, programs and events were virtual with no face to face events. As 4-H began to do virtual programs, members were now able to participate in programs that took place all over Michigan, national and even worldwide. One of the most popular was the Adulting 101 classes that including subjects from balancing a checkbook to minor car repair.

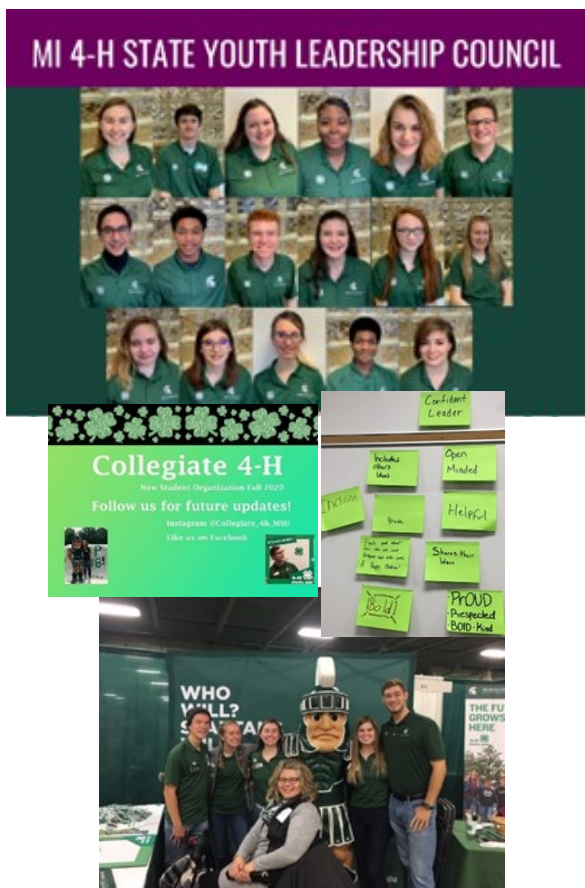
**Tri-County 4-H Virtual Learning Showcase** was created for 4-H members in Berrien, Branch and Branch Counties to exhibit their 4-H projects at year end. Members entered pictures and/or video clips by August 12. Judging took place on August 14 and results were shared with the community. 12 Branch County members entered 27 projects in the Virtual Showcase to exhibit their projects at the end of the year. A link to the video clip from the showcase: <https://www.facebook.com/BranchCounty4H/videos/431343651159897>

**Branch County 4-H Proud Equestrian Program (PEP)** has been in existence since the 1979. the program exists to provide an opportunity for youth with disabilities to gain valuable skills such as confidence, and social skills as well as valuable therapy. At the same time, teen volunteers are learning about inclusion programs and how to work with people with disabilities. In June 2019, 12 young people with disabilities and over 30 volunteers participated in the week long program. The Branch County 4-H Program along with community donors including local service clubs fund the program operation. The Branch County 4-H PEP has a certified instructor and many volunteers.

**Branch County 4-H Outreach Programs** included a Community Carnival at the Fairfield Plaza in Coldwater in October 2019. The Branch County 4-H Leaders' Council provided the funds for several activities as well as admittance to the Children's Museum. Over 250 youth and their parents participating in 4-H for the day.



The photo above features a few of the programs that were created for 4-H members throughout the year. Social media was very effective at marketing these program to our Branch County youth.



The Michigan 4-H State Youth Leadership Council (SYLC) is a statewide leadership opportunity for youth. SYLC members serve as representatives of the 4-H program, promoting 4-H through state and local activities, and provide youth voice and perspective on the development of 4-H programs. Two Branch County 4-H Youth currently serve on the council.





## BRANCH COUNTY 4-H LEADER HONORED

Laura Johns was recognized statewide for her work to make 4-H virtual programs successful.

Laura is a leader in the dog project and used video clips to teach dog obedience and other classes to the members in her club. 4-H Leaders are critically important to the success of 4-H especially now in a virtual programming world.



## NUTRITION & PHYSICAL ACTIVITY EDUCATION



Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education

(SNAP-Ed) is an evidence-based program that helps people lead healthier lives, teaches people eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits about good nutrition, how to make their food dollars stretch further and learn to be physically active. Classes are held in a series so participants can work towards practicing healthy lifestyle habits. One-time presentations introduce concepts to larger groups.

In addition to classes, Community Nutrition Instructors (CNIs) work with program site leaders to assess capacity for change and coach them through improving policies, systems, and their physical environment (PSE). This PSE work is critical to supporting long-term behavior change addressed during classes.

Over the last program year, CNI Val Albright strengthened partnerships with schools and community organizations such as the Branch Intermediate School District, Promedica Hospital, Tommy's House, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Burnside Senior Center, countywide Head Start programs and the Branch District Library. From October 2019 through September 2020, 392 Branch youth and 92 adults completed a series, or one time presentation.

## STRESS LESS WITH MINDFULNESS

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. Mindfulness was a skill much needed in 2020.

MSUE Community Behavioral Health Educators adapted the Stress Less with Mindfulness (SLWM) series to a

web-based program to introduce the experience and practice of mindfulness. Over 7000 people have participated in this program to date. More than 30 Branch residents participated in mindfulness programs offered by the team in 2020.

## FOOD SAFETY & PRESERVATION

MSUE'S Food Safety Team worked quickly in March to modify their face-to-face curricula into web-based offerings and expanded their programs to offer weekly on-line interactive education. During the pandemic there has been an increase in the number of consumers preserving food at home along with an increased focus on food safety.

The goal for the team was to reach as many people as possible—answering consumers questions, providing evidence based resources, and clarifying misinformation and unsafe food preservation techniques found on the internet and social media.

Programs engaged food service workers, homemakers, families and youth on topics such as food preservation, the cottage food law, food pantry safety, emergency preparedness and seasonally-themed cooking workshops. From March 2020 through November 2020, over 11,000 people have logged into these programs—many from Branch County.

The expansion of this team's efforts and the capacity they have built around food safety education is a shining example of success for MSUE's response to education during the pandemic.

**JOIN US ONLINE!**  
 Register in advance for these FREE workshops.  
 No Internet? No Problem! Workshops are available by phone.

- Food Safety Q&A - Nov. 23rd - 1 p.m. EDT
- Food Safety Q&A - Nov. 30th - 1 p.m. EDT
- Pantry Food Safety - It's Your Job! - Dec. 1st - 9 a.m. EDT
- Cooking for Crowds - Dec. 2nd 9 a.m. EDT
- Preserving Your Harvest - Dec. 3rd 1 p.m. & 6 p.m. EDT

To Learn More Visit [www.canr.msu.edu/foodpreservation/events](http://www.canr.msu.edu/foodpreservation/events)  
 To listen by phone: Call in advance to register - 877-643-9882

Join us online via Zoom for Home Food Preservation Class:

### Dehydrating

Drying food is one of the oldest methods of preserving food. Learn how to safely dry fruits and vegetables using various methods and research-based resources.

July 23, 2020 1-2:30 pm or 6-7:30 pm EDT

To register visit: <https://events.canr.msu.edu/Preservation>

**Pantry Food Safety - It's Your Job!**  
 MSU Extension educators present food safety training for volunteers and staff working in food pantries and food banks.

This online training covers hand-washing, personal hygiene, cleaning and sanitizing, receiving and storing, re-packaging, and legal issues. Participants will receive a certificate of completion.

**Wednesday - July 29, 2020  
 9 AM - 12 PM EDT**

For more information visit [www.canr.msu.edu/events/pantry-food-safety-its-your-job](http://www.canr.msu.edu/events/pantry-food-safety-its-your-job)

# Agriculture Program Highlights

Prior to the 2020 health crisis, MSU Extension agriculture and agribusiness educators were already providing “non-traditional” options for growers to meet their educational needs through webinars, blogs, podcasts, email newsletters, and texting. Therefore, when the pandemic stopped face-to-face programs in March, our Southwest Michigan Ag team was prepared for the challenge.

**MSUE’s Rapid Response For Agriculture Website** was a resource developed in 2019 in response to several weather-related emergencies (freeze, flood then drought!) The site provided a single point of entry for farmers to access resources to help them navigate those disasters. In March 2020, the site was quickly populated with resources and management tools to aid producers through the pandemic emergency. As needs emerged across the various commodities, webinars, articles and on-line tools were developed to help farms keep employees safe, while still meeting consumer demands for a fresh, safe food supply during the emergency conditions created by COVID-19.

**Market disruptions** caused by the pandemic had great potential to devastate the farm economy and the food supply. MSUE provided leadership in convening partners and information to assist during those first critical weeks and months of the pandemic. For example:

- In partnership with the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and Michigan Pork Producers Association, MSUE hosted informational webinars for pork producers. The sessions enabled industry experts to update producers on markets, options for animal overcrowding, euthanasia recommendations, disposal options and capacity, financial assistance and mental health resources.
- The greenhouse industry was hit hard when the first Stay at Home order forced large retail outlets to close garden centers. MSUE educators quickly stepped in to provide a series of workshops on alternative marketing strategies to help garden centers quickly shift to sell their plants through curbside pick-up, delivery, and online orders. Over 300 people participated.

After intensive work with campus specialists and state partners, the [COVID-19 Hazard Assessment and Mitigation Program tool](#) was launched in July, to help ag operations reduce the risk of worker exposure to COVID-19 and mitigate disease spread. The tool is available to all ag related businesses to aid them in designing a pandemic preparedness plan, identifying risks for exposure, and developing mitigation practices supporting worker safety and health. The tool and supporting

education materials align with federal, state and local guidance and thus has required several updates to reflect changes in rules and the science related to the virus.

**Despite the pivot to COVID-19 related demands, MSUE continued to work on educational and research initiatives critical to producers in Branch County:**

MSUE’s Pork Team is responsible for the development of a Secure Pork Supply (SPS) plan at the state level and for individual pork operations. SPS planning is an effort of the pork industry to protect itself from loss if a highly contagious foreign animal disease (FAD) with severe consequences were to occur in the United States. The goal is a business continuity strategy for pork operations with no FAD infections. \$1.4 Million is generated every day that the Michigan swine industry continues business, and to date, 80% of the 2691 pig farms are better prepared for business continuity in the case of FAD because of SPS planning efforts.



Research projects and demonstration field days highlight on-farm research collaborations between MSU Extension, local growers and grantors. In 2020, research continued as usual with field day events moved to a digital format. Ag Educators working in and around Branch counties, managed local research plots and used their expertise to highlight results at Virtual Field Days focused on wheat, cover crops, corn, manure management and irrigation. Highlights focused on critical issues being faced by producers in the county. Unlike other years, the archived programs continue to be available on the MSU Extension website at [www.canr.msu.edu/virtualfielddays](http://www.canr.msu.edu/virtualfielddays).

Annual events such as Farmers Day in Coldwater (190 people in attendance), Ag Action Day in Kalamazoo and the 2018 Farm Bill update held in Marshall took place on schedule in early 2020.

**The Virtual Livestock Precision Farming Day** held in October was attended by 106 people representing 26 states and 12 countries. This webinar focused on new technologies designed to help de-risk food animal production using remote sensors, computer-based monitoring of animals, and cloud-based data platforms to facilitate individual animal-centered approaches to animal care. Surveys showed that 100% of attendees said their understanding of the principles underlying precision livestock farming increased as a result of participation. In addition, 94% gained a greater appreciation for the potential that precision livestock farming (PLF) offers farmers, 86% said they intended to explore at least one of the PLF technologies described for possible application on their farm and 64% said they would be interested in participating in future PLF-related research on their farm.

## VIRTUAL BREAKFAST SERIES



The Virtual Breakfast Series was held every Thursday at 7 a.m. from April 16 through Sept. 10, 2020. and provided the latest information from our MSU field crop

specialists and educators. The scheduled topics were fluid, flexible and focused on the most current topics. All field crop producers, agribusiness professionals, government agency personnel and others interested in field crops production and management were encouraged to participate in our annual virtual meeting series.

The virtual meetings have two segments each week. The first part of the meeting focuses on a specific topic such as early season weed control, soil fertility, or mitigating rutted and rough fields. The second portion of the meeting is devoted to weather. A question and answer period was available every week. Restricted Use Pesticide credits were available for participants each week.

The Virtual Breakfast Series had 2,134 participants in 2020. Participants were from 11 countries, 13 states, and represented 57 of 83 Michigan counties which included Branch.

Based on a year-end follow up survey of participants, 47% were farmers and 27% were agribusiness professionals. The number of acre represented by those participating was 354,298. A total of 77% indicated a change in management and preferences will be made by participants.

Participants said: *"I really like this series. The topics you cover and the question/answer periods are highly informative."*

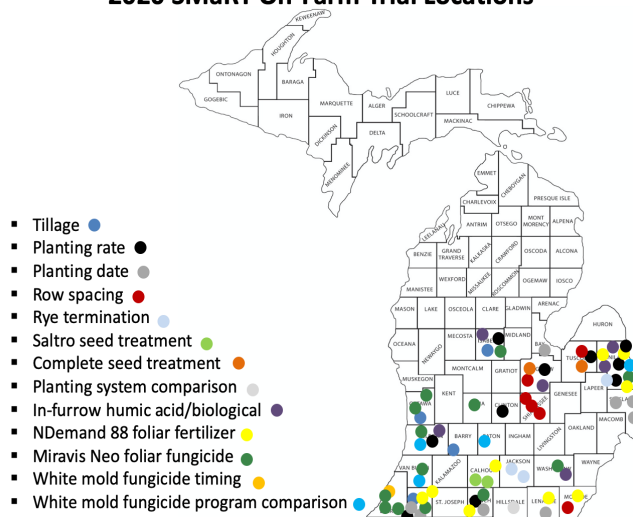
*"Continue with the format in place, timely featured topic plus climate/weather session. Having open discussion with the various specialists is the reason I attend with high frequency - and I am out of state."*

*"They were excellent. On time, professional and timely topics. I took away at least one piece of information that I did not know from each session. I loved the format of info, weather, then open for questions. Great work!"*

The Virtual Breakfast Series is a strong testimonial to the relevancy of the entire MSU Extension Field Crops Team. The growth in participation shows a continued support of the educational impact for MSU Extension programs to increase farm efficiency and profitability.

## Agriculture Program Highlights

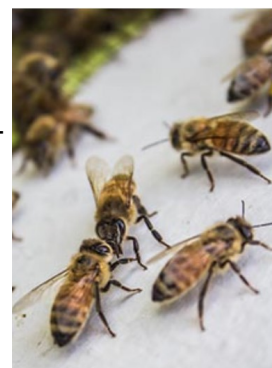
### 2020 SMaRT On-Farm Trial Locations



Partnership with the Michigan Soybean Promotion Committee and local growers makes soybean research in Branch County possible. Soybean research trials will be summarized in a report mailed directly to 12,000 Michigan soybean producers.

## SERIES PROVIDES SUPPORT TO BEEKEEPERS

MSU Educators specializing in pollinators and beekeeping held 10 webinars from March to October 2020. With almost 1700 viewers, the workshops provided expert training for new and experienced beekeepers. Sessions in March and April focused on first year and established colonies. Webinars that followed were an open question and answer format. Fifteen viewers were from Branch County. The efforts of the apiculture team support MSU's Pollinator Initiative's mission which is to develop a coordinated research, education, extension, and policy driven effort to address priority issues related to pollinators and pollination in Michigan. Michigan State University works with partners around the state in pursuit of research-based solutions for beekeepers, growers, land managers, and policy makers to promote economic vitality and ecological stability.



## COMMUNICATING WITH LOCALS

**Print:** In order to better serve local farm communities in southern Michigan, MSU Extension continued its collaboration with Coldwater Daily Reporter to produce a weekly full-page spread of short articles highlighting important seasonal agriculture issues, such as tips for late planting, farm stress and diseases that affect livestock. Some of these MSU Extension News articles appear in three local newspapers (Coldwater, Sturgis, Hillsdale).

**Radio:** MSU Extension educators from all over the District continued to provide weekly updates on agriculture, 4-H, food safety, farm stress, local food systems, nutrition, community development and natural resources courtesy of Ken Delaney (Delaney in the Morning, radio WTVB-AM/FM).

**Worldwide Web:** 5164 website visitors from Branch County viewed 27,819 pages on the MSU Extension website in 2020.

## MSUE 2020 BY THE NUMBERS

# OF <u>PROGRAMS</u> HOSTED IN BRANCH	29
# OF <u>PARTICIPANTS</u> WHO ATTENDED PROGRAMS HOSTED IN BRANCH	697
# OF <u>PROGRAMS</u> OFFERED STATEWIDE ATTENDED BY BRANCH RESIDENTS	127
# OF <u>PARTICIPANTS</u> FROM BRANCH WHO ATTENDED STATEWIDE PROGRAMS	605
# OF <u>MSUE STAFF</u> REPORTING BRANCH PARTICIPANTS ATTENDING THEIR PROGRAMS	81
# DIRECT CONSULTATIONS REPORTED	86
MSU PRODUCT CENTER BUSINESS	2
# SOIL SAMPLES PROCESSED IN 2019	32
4-H YOUTH	835
4-H ADULT VOLUNTEERS	145
4-H YOUTH LEADERS	37

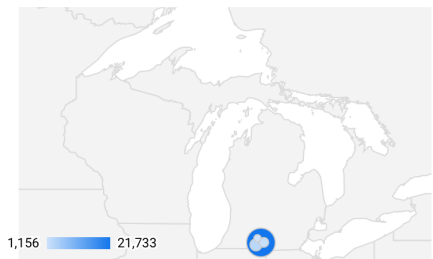
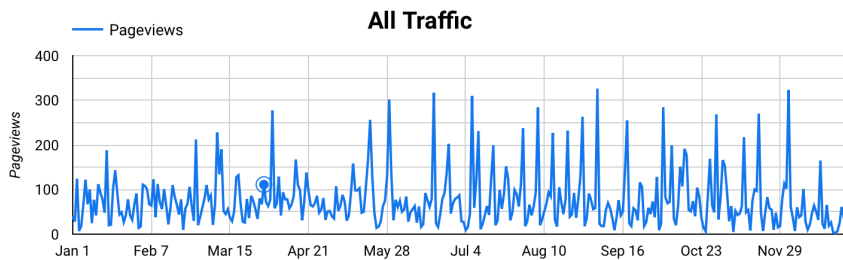
### Branch General Fund Budget

2019—\$121,160

2020—\$127,417

2021—\$124,055

## MSUE Branch Website Statistics January 2020 - December 2020



Users  
5,164

Sessions  
9,078

Pageviews  
27,819

Pages / Session  
3.06

Avg. Time on Page  
00:01:51

Bounce Rate  
51.89%

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