

BRANCH COUNTY ANNUAL REPORT 2024

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Our Staff:

- Tamra Bildner, Office Manager
- Angie Gradiz, Ag Water Use Efficiency & Irrigation Educator
- Megan Wilczynski, 4-H Program Coordinator (PC)
- Nisha Ritchie, Community Nutrition Instructor (CNI)



Message from the Interim District Director

Thank you for another great year of partnership and community impact! We appreciate your support in helping MSU Extension serve the residents of Branch County.

Sincerely, Kai Gritter.

Impact in Branch County



2,727 participants from the county attended programs



694 youth enrolled in 4-H



736 county residents participated in health & nutrition programs



15 answered Ask Extension questions



Residents participated in **212** programs (across the state) and **75** programs (hosted in county)



221 MSU Extension volunteers



563 participants in county agriculture programs



76 client consultations

4-H & Youth Development:



Megan Wilczynski,
Branch County 4-H
Program Coordinator

Children and families of Branch County continued to benefit from a variety of programs in partnership with dedicated 4-H volunteers and MSU Extension staff.

Topics included:

- Career exploration and workforce development
- Child & family development
- Healthy living
- Leadership & civic engagement
- Science literacy

32, 4-H clubs
206, 4-H Volunteers
694, 4-H members
2,093; 4-H youth participants

Fun Summer 4-H Camp

In June, 2024, seven Branch County 4-H members joined 37 other youth from St. Joseph and Cass Counties for the annual Summer 4-H Camp! The camp ran for three days and was hosted at Amigo Centre, with support from 18 adult volunteers.

Campers participated in a variety of adventure activities like canoeing, swimming, water games, fishing, archery, hiking, crafts, camp challenges, outdoor meals, campfire songs and more!



*Youth (ages 8-12) enjoying
4-H summer camp!*

Branch County 4-H Pie Auction Raises \$14K+

The Branch County 4-H Leaders Council hosted its annual spaghetti dinner and pie auction at The Gathering Barn. Over 50 pies were homemade by council members, supporters and volunteers. They were auctioned in both live and silent formats, raising more than **\$14,000**. Three top supporters received personalized awards. Attendees shared pie slices during the auction, creating a lively, community-driven event. **In its 13th year, the funds raised from this popular event will help with programming, project supplies, Expo Days, National 4-H Congress, local camps and scholarships!**



Agriculture & Agribusiness:



Angie Gradiz (left) was hired in 2024 as an Agriculture Water Use Efficiency and Irrigation Educator. She is based in Branch County and supports Michigan's southwest region by promoting efficient irrigation practices. Using tools like irrigation scheduling and soil moisture monitoring, she helps optimize water use and boost crop yields.

Angie has co-authored multiple articles and fact sheets and promoted MSU Extension programs and resources through radio public service announcements and outreach during community events. For more, explore: <https://www.canr.msu.edu/irrigation>

New in 2024! Cut Flower Farm Tour

To address a clear need for beginning-level agricultural education, MSU Extension developed a series of three Cut Flower Farm Tours designed for commercial growers looking to expand their knowledge and network with others in the industry.

Each of the tours focused on a specific educational theme explored through a facilitated discussion with MSU Extension educators and the host farmers. The series placed special emphasis on topics of soil health, insect and disease management, pesticide safety, and large-scale cut flower production.



Great Lakes Glads
in Bronson hosted a tour!

As a result of attending this program, **94%** of respondents reported an improved understanding of the three manageable aspects of soil, and **100%** of respondents improved their knowledge of pesticide safety.

Emergency Response to Accidents Involving Livestock: ERAIL in Action

On June 3, 2024, the Branch County ERAIL trailer was deployed from the Branch County Sheriff's Department to address a fire in a large cattle hauler on I-69. The semi-truck driver pulled off the northbound lane about 100 yards north of the weigh station just south of the Fenn Road Exit 10, with a blown tire that ignited the fire. There were 33 cattle in the 48-foot-long aluminum and wood floor trailer. Coldwater Fire and Lakeland Fire responded with the Branch County Sheriff's Department.



"The training was very useful. The firefighters and deputies understand the need to use their equipment to block the view of the one lane of traffic still moving. Was off the highway in two hours." –Animal control officer at the scene.

Between August and November 2024, MSU Extension hosted a series of ribbon-cutting ceremonies to unveil ERAIL trailers across the state, enhancing local emergency response for livestock incidents. The ERAIL fleet has expanded from three to nine state-of-the-art response trailers statewide, with one of the original units based right in **Branch County**.

Health & Nutrition:



Making an impact in Branch County!

Former teacher-turned-CNI, **Nisha Ritchie** (pictured left) returned to her old classrooms in Branch County, where many of her program participants were children of her former science students! She taught the *Teen Cuisine* curriculum at Bronson Junior/Senior High School and Legg Middle School, and her legacy came full circle, with students writing heartfelt cards reflecting on lessons learned. One student wrote, “*We found way healthier and better ways to make [my Papaw’s] food because of you.*” Another student noted,

“I eat a lot more veggies and fruits... they fill me up unlike junk food.”

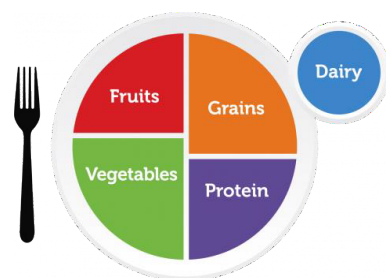
Nisha also taught the impactful *Show Me Nutrition Pre-K* curriculum to **over 200** students at Bronson Early Learning Center, Girard Head Start, Lincoln Early Learning Center, and Quincy Early Learning Center!

Healthy eating for competitions and everyday health and wellbeing

After a presentation at a county-wide professional development day, a high school teacher/cheerleading coach asked Nisha Ritchie to speak to her team about the importance of consistent and balanced nutrition for supporting health, athletic performance and injury prevention.

At the first practice, Nisha sat with 17 cheerleaders and reviewed MyPlate, explaining how nutrients are converted into energy by mitochondria (i.e., the 'powerhouses') in our cells. She emphasized the importance of eating healthy to support each other during routines and stunts. She also reiterated how healthy nutrition could help support their team goals of qualifying for competitions and discussed how skipping meals could potentially harm their health and performance.

Nisha and the team collaboratively created a SNACK BUCKET for easy access to healthy foods that was placed in the coach's classroom. The youth committed to pairing up as 'breakfast buddies' to support each other and ensure that everyone has a healthy breakfast.



I have girls that are taking turns bringing food for the snack bucket by week!
~Coach

736 Branch County residents participated in health and nutrition programs in 2024.

12 Branch County residents were impacted by a site receiving nutrition or physical activity Policy, System, or Environmental (PSE) education.

For additional success stories, and access to classes, articles, health resources, and more, explore:
https://www.canr.msu.edu/food_health
or scan the QR code:



Community, Food & Environment:



Tyler Augst, Government & Community Vitality Educator

Meeting Housing Needs

In the second quarter of 2024, MSU Extension's Tyler Augst (pictured left) co-facilitated three, one-day housing workshops on “Building a Foundation to Attainable Housing” at different locations throughout the region. This program was requested by Southwest Housing Partnership as part of the implementation of their regional action plan that calls for “holding region-wide trainings/workshops on the lasting impact of redlining and exclusionary zoning as it pertains to homeownership rates and the steps to take to rectify these actions.”

The workshops, with **seven** attendees from Branch County, were designed to provide education for local government officials, staff and other leaders on housing trends and tools that Michigan communities can use to meet community housing goals. Participants also learned about the history of zoning and other policies as a tool for exclusion in the past and strategies for more equitable processes and policies in the future. These workshops brought local leaders together for engaging discussions and activities that reviewed local master plans and zoning ordinances with a housing lens.

“I will take this information to my village and hope to get new outlook on some of the laws in place.”
– Program participant.

Building Strong Fiscal Foundations for Michigan Communities

In partnership with the Michigan Department of Treasury, Tyler Augst co-facilitated eight *Fiscally Ready Communities* webinars. The series reached **1,163 local government officials and staff** across Michigan, including residents from Branch County. Topics included: Budgeting for Fiscal Sustainability; Capital Asset Management and Planning; Internal Controls; Nuts and Bolts: Fees, Fines, Purchasing, and Receipting; and From Fundamentals to Best Practices.

The sessions had a strong impact: **87%** gained knowledge of financial best practices, **82%** felt more confident assessing fiscal health, and **81%** improved their job effectiveness." The program is strengthening financial sustainability and governance in communities statewide and resonating with participants, one of whom shared:

“Even though I am exposed to this information on a regular basis, I look to utilize webinars such as these to improve my knowledge and understanding on these topics to assist in a better functioning organization.”

To access all Community, Food, and Environment programs and resources, go to <https://www.canr.msu.edu/community>

MSU Extension's Statewide Impact

Helping people improve their lives by bringing the vast knowledge and resources of Michigan State University directly to individuals, communities and businesses.



\$246.5 billion annual impact of food and agriculture on Michigan's economy



29,264,562 contacts through social media, web activity, e-newsletters and handouts



133,306 total youth participants



12,861 total volunteers



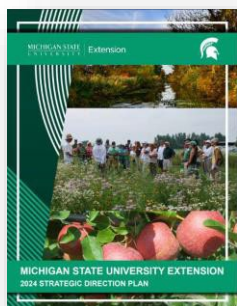
9,808 people participated in Food Safety programs including ServSafe®



67,320 Participants in Community, Food and Environment programs



1,876 Extension Master Gardeners (EMG) spent 96,653 hours helping individuals and communities grow



In 2024, MSU Extension completed a comprehensive Strategic Direction Plan, which illustrates our vision for the future, outlining strengths to build on and opportunities to embrace. To read the full report, go to canr.msu.edu/od/directors_office/strategic-direction or scan the QR code.



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