

OCEANA COUNTY ANNUAL REPORT 2025

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Message from the District Director



I'm pleased to share the results of another successful year of collaboration between Oceana County and Michigan State University (MSU) Extension. Your continued support has allowed us to make a meaningful impact on youth, families, businesses, and communities. This year, MSU Extension delivered a wide range of research-based educational services—helping individuals lead healthier lives, assisting new and local businesses, expanding youth leadership and career exploration opportunities, supporting farmers with business management and mental health resources, and more.

Our staff live and work alongside county residents, building strong community connections and responding directly to local needs. We maintained our online presence through virtual courses, timely responses to questions on topics from gardening to food safety, increased social media outreach, and a wealth of research-backed resources on our website.

Thank you for your ongoing partnership. On behalf of the MSU Extension team serving Oceana County, we appreciate your support and look forward to another year of working together—and hope to see you at an upcoming program.

James Kelly
District Director

Staff

- Reillyn Ford – Research Assistant
- Jennifer Payne – 4-H Program Coordinator
- Kathy Walicki – Office Manager
- James Kelly – District Director

Emily Lavelly – Tree Fruit Educator
Amber Pumford – 4-H Admin Support
Ben Werling – Vegetable Educator

Overall Impact



6,317 people reached through activity in Oceana County (programming, consultations, office visits, soil tests, tip-line calls)



2,325 participants from the county attending programs.



718 client consultations



297 programs (across the state) attended by participants from this county.



64 programs hosted in Oceana County



35 Ask Extension questions answered



103 volunteers



27 community coalitions and partnerships within the county that MSU Extension employees are members of

Communications Reach



204,703 contacts through social media, web activity, e-newsletters, and handouts.



45,831 Facebook views on the Oceana County/4-H page



925 plat books, soil tests, and other resources sold in Oceana County.

Youth Programming



250 4-H youth enrollments



40 4-H Clubs



1,514 youth participants



112 volunteers



\$105,512 4-H volunteer hour value



Through MSU Extension's Teen Mental Health First Aid training, students at Shelby and Hart High Schools learned how to recognize and respond to mental health challenges among their peers. The impact of this training became clear when one student participant recognized multiple warning signs in a friend's behavior. Using the tMHFA action plan, he started a conversation, discovered his friend was thinking about suicide, and helped connect him to support. This student later shared how grateful he was for the training—and how it empowered him to take action that may have saved a life. This story highlights the real, immediate impact of equipping youth with the skills to support one another and seek help when it matters most.



Nearly 200 4-H members showcased their projects at the Oceana County Fair, with 134 youth participating in the three market auctions. Community support reached a new milestone, generating a record \$441,474 in auction sales. Livestock barns were filled to capacity—so much so that overflow lambs and goats expanded into the old horse barn—highlighting strong growth in local 4-H livestock programs. To ensure equitable participation, youth leaders launched a new Show Clothes and Equipment Closet, removing financial barriers for members needing attire or supplies.



Thanks to support from the Michigan 4-H Foundation and National 4-H Council, 3 Oceana County teens joined other Michigan teens who traveled to Washington, D.C. for the 2025 Ignite by 4-H conference. Participants explored careers, built leadership skills, and connected with diverse peers from across the country—many experiencing their first flight or visit to the capital. Through hands-on workshops, inspiring keynote speakers, and the creation of youth-led community service projects, participants gained confidence, new friendships, and practical skills they can bring back to their home communities. This experience broadened their horizons and empowered them to make meaningful change.

Community Health and Nutrition Programming



276 county residents who participated in health and nutrition programs.



2 sites receiving nutrition or physical activity policy, system, or environmental education in county.



131 policy, systems, and environmental changes implemented in the county.,



Foodie Tales and Adventures

In partnership with MSU Extension Community Nutrition, 4-H, and the Great Start Collaborative, the Foodie Flamingo lesson engages youth with a color-changing science experiment, healthy-food tasting, and active play. Students take home activities that encourage continued learning and family conversations. This year, the program reached children at the Shelby Public Schools Early Childhood Education Center.



Policy, System, Environment

Progressions Work Center (PWC), part of West Michigan Community Mental Health Services, serves 41 children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Oceana County. This year, MSU Extension partnered with PWC to support the S.I.M.P.L.E. group by teaching Healthy Choices for Everybody and helping the center secure essential indoor exercise equipment. The project strengthens access to safe, year-round physical activity—especially important during inclement weather. Equipment such as cardio drum sets, steps, resistance bands, mats, and weights will support balance, strength, and aerobic fitness for clients of all ages and abilities. This initiative lays the groundwork for long-term policy and environmental changes at PWC, expanding exercise opportunities and promoting healthier, more active lifestyles for the individuals they serve.



Keys to Embracing Aging

Keys to Embracing Aging: Stress Management & Sleep Hygiene. MSU Extension partnered with the Oceana County Council on Aging to offer a free, interactive session focused on aging well. Participants learned practical stress-management strategies and sleep-hygiene tips to support healthier daily routines and long-term wellbeing. Led by MSU Extension Health Educator Naomi Hyso, the workshop equipped older adults with simple, evidence-based tools to improve relaxation, resilience, and overall quality of life.



Protecting Carrot Crops

Food safety inspections can be high-stakes for growers, and miscommunication can lead to costly consequences. During a recent inspection, two inspectors mistakenly classified a processing carrot operation as a fresh-market farm—an error that would have triggered an enforcement action and jeopardized the grower's entire 2025 crop, valued at \$420,000. MSU Extension stepped in to support a follow-up inspection, helping clarify production practices and providing the correct processor documentation. This intervention resolved the misunderstanding, prevented regulatory action, and protected the grower's future harvest and income. Grower feedback says it best: "Hope you know how much your help actually saved us—our carrots of 2025. As you know, we would not have been capable of dealing with FSMA. Thank you!" Through trusted relationships and technical expertise, MSU Extension helps ensure that compliance conversations are accurate, fair, and supportive of Michigan's agricultural economy.



West Central Irrigation Day

The first-ever West Central Irrigation Day was held at the West Central Michigan AgBio Research and Extension Center, addressing a long-standing gap in irrigation and water-use education in the northwest region of the state. With recent changes to water-use regulations, advances in irrigation technology, and aging equipment on many farms, demand for timely, research-based information was high. The inaugural event drew 28 participants—an encouraging turnout for a new program. Post-event impact surveys showed strong learning gains, with most respondents reporting their knowledge "increased a great deal." Despite a small survey sample, attendees estimated that the practices and information gained could influence management decisions across 6,150 acres. Based on participant estimates, this translates into a potential cost savings of more than \$46,000 for those who completed the survey. This event marks an important step in strengthening irrigation management, supporting producer decision-making, and delivering timely MSU Extension resources to an underserved region.



West Central Michigan Research and Extension Center



In 2024, the West Central Michigan Research and Extension Center (WCMREC) continued to strengthen Michigan's agricultural sector through impactful research, education, and industry partnerships. Serving more than 3,600 annual visitors, the center functioned as a vital hub for outreach—hosting MSU Extension programs for tree fruit and vegetable growers, the Farming for the Future Field Day, Spring Horticulture Day, and Asparagus Research Day. These events provided growers with timely, research-based information to improve crop management, productivity, and environmental stewardship.



Research efforts focused on high-value specialty crops central to Michigan agriculture. Projects included asparagus variety trials; pest and disease management; irrigation and calcium studies; and cutting-edge autonomous asparagus harvesting technology using 3D vision-guided systems. Tree fruit research advanced grower resilience through studies on climate adaptation, soil health, pollinator habitat, cover crops, regenerative practices, and drone/autonomous applications. Additional work on apple irrigation scheduling is helping growers conserve water and improve water quality through innovative monitoring technologies.



WCMREC also strengthened leadership development by hosting a cohort of the Great Lakes Leadership Academy's Leadership Advancement Program, supporting the next generation of Michigan agricultural leaders.

Through its combined research and outreach efforts, WCMREC is delivering measurable impact—enhancing production practices, fostering innovation, and ensuring Michigan growers have the tools and knowledge needed to remain competitive and sustainable.

Environmental Stewardship



Advancing Steelhead Sustainability

Steelhead fishing plays a key role in Michigan's river-based economies, supporting guides, tackle shops, restaurants, and small businesses—particularly in counties like Oceana that draw anglers to the White and Pere Marquette Rivers each spring. To help sustain this important fishery, MSU Extension and partners continued the Michigan River Steelhead Program, now in its fifth year, which uses the Great Lakes Angler Diary app to collect high-quality data that would otherwise cost nearly \$600,000 annually through traditional creel surveys. In 2025, 73 volunteer anglers recorded 3,320 steelhead across eight river systems.

On local waters in Oceana County, this includes monitoring key steelhead areas like the North Branch of the White River and sections of the Pere Marquette River. Wild fish are also very important to steelhead fisheries, particularly in areas like the Upper Pere Marquette River that are not stocked. Some rivers had an increase in wild fish catch rates during the '25 season but others did not. This data provides critical insight for the Michigan DNR as they set stocking rates and manage fisheries on rivers like this where both wild and stocked steelhead contribute to the local angling economy. The program also strengthens public understanding and engagement: 86 participants reported increased knowledge of steelhead biology and management, and findings reached more than 17,000 people through reports, presentations, and media.

Lakes and Streams



Conservation Stewards

Building on the success of the 2024 Conservation Stewards Program (CSP) cohort, MSU Extension partnered with the Oceana Conservation District and CSP alumni to launch the first Conservation Stewards Program in Oceana County. With support from educators Bindu Bhakta and Erick Elgin, planning began in early 2025 and led to a successful inaugural cohort later in 2025. This expansion broadened access to natural resources education and strengthened local conservation leadership across the region.

Local Governance



Strengthening Local Leadership

MSU Extension's Governing Essentials Series equipped local elected and appointed officials with practical tools to support transparent and effective governance. In partnership with the Oceana County Planning Commission, MSU Extension provided Open Meetings Act training at no cost to participants, helping leaders understand Michigan's public-meeting requirements and apply best practices for open, accountable decision-making. This collaboration strengthened public trust and enhanced the capacity of local boards to serve their communities.



Zoning Board of Appeals

The MSU Extension Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) Online Certificate Course is a fully asynchronous program housed in MSU's learning management system, Desire 2 Learn (D2L). ZBA Online fills an important training need by offering 24/7 on-demand learning — particularly helpful for ZBA members, as most boards do not meet monthly and many members of such boards are called to meet once or twice a year with little over two weeks to prepare for the important decision(s) they are being asked to make. In 2025, nine residents from Oceana County successfully completed the ZBA certificate course.

Product Center – Small Business Support

- 10 clients served
- 227 hours of consulting and research provided
- 2 new businesses started, 1 job created.

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