



U.P. Ag Connections Newsletter

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Agricultural News from MSU Extension and AgBioResearch

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MSU-UPREC Recognized as Marquette Conservation District’s Outstanding Conservation Partner of the Year

By James DeDecker

Back in February, UPREC Farm Manager, Paul Naasz, and I were honored to accept an award on behalf of our entire team as Marquette Conservation District’s (MCD) Outstanding Conservation Partner of the Year. This award recognized the contributions of UPREC staff to an annual event organized by MCD and Alger CD called Agripalooza. For the last 15 years, Agripalooza has brought together 60+ volunteer partners, 350+ students and their teachers from Marquette and Alger Counties for a day of hands-on learning about agriculture, natural resources and conservation at UPREC. Every student goes on a tractor-drawn wagon ride with Paul to learn about beef cattle production and farming in the UP. From there, participants rotate through a selection of around 35 stations where experts lead them through short activities and conversations on topics ranging from farm equipment to plant science, soils, produce safety, composting, stream ecology, watersheds and water quality, invasive species, forest management, wildland firefighting, bird ID, pollinators and so much more. Agripalooza is unique in the way it blends place-based education, youth conservation and career exploration with hands-on learning and outdoor experiences. This special event is always one of the highlights of our year, but we rarely pause to consider its true value and lasting impact.



Receiving the Outstanding Conservation Partner of the Year award was great, but what made it especially meaningful was how the award was presented. MCD staff invited other Agripalooza stakeholders to the award ceremony at their annual meeting to reflect on their experiences participating in the event, as well as the impact it has had on students over the years. Phil Carter and Nancy Taylor representing Partridge Creek Compost in Ishpeming shared their experience as presenters teaching youth about the ecological value of compost. Their story beautifully captured the transformative potential of experiential education that makes the invisible world of microbes

and plant nutrients visible for students. They concluded by saying, “When students understand the clear benefit of composting food waste, instead of trashing it, they start to view it as a resource – as a form of life that supports new life.”

Phil Halamka, a 5th grade teacher at Negaunee Public Schools, sent a letter discussing how Agripalooza helps him reach students. “I’ve seen students who struggle to sit still in the classroom become completely absorbed while identifying insects or exploring soil. I’ve watched quiet students open-up because the learning is active, meaningful, and rooted in experiences. Agripalooza sticks with them long after we’re back at school. Many still talk about the hayride, the hands-on stations, and the “real scientists” they met.” Next up were John Highlen and John Reinertsen representing The Trout Unlimited Fred Waara Chapter. They discussed how giving students an opportunity to try their hand at casting a fly rod in the lawn opens the door for conversations about cold water conservation efforts that help preserve the UP’s wild places and outdoor recreation heritage for the next generation.

We also heard from Hope Bruce, a teacher with 29 years of service at Wells Township School. She noted that Wells is a small school with only twelve students total K-8th grade and she teaches multiple grades, having the same students for 3-4 years. “Having the same teacher for so long makes it invaluable for them to learn from other voices – professionals who reinforce the topics we cover in class and introduce them to new ideas that I may not have the expertise to teach. It broadens their perspective in ways I can’t do alone.” Hope also shared some fun quotes directly from the students when asked to identify their favorite Agripalooza stations and something they learned. One student recalled, “The guys showed us how to measure trees to count the tree’s age. We looked at tools like a compass. I told him my papa works at a place called Potlach.” Hope went on to say, “Their reflections remind me, year after year, why experiences like Agripalooza matter so much. These are the moments they remember. For all we know, one of the sessions may end up leading to a career choice, but at least, these experiences shape their interests, spark their curiosity, and sometimes may even inspire a lifelong passion.” She ended with one more quote from a student in her class: “We all love Agripalooza! It is a place where we can learn things in fun ways.”



It was an absolute honor to be recognized as a key partner of MCD and humbling to reflect on the impact this collaborative program has had on generations of UP youth. I think all of the partners who work hard to make it happen each year will identify with this last statement from Phil Halamka at Negaunee Public Schools, “Agripalooza is a gift to teachers and students in our area, and I’m grateful for the work of the local Conservation Districts and all the partners who make it possible. I want you to know how much I value the program and the positive impact it’s had on my students. Thank you for supporting conservation education and outdoor learning in the UP!

When to Start Grazing

By Frank Wardynski

Deciding when to begin grazing each spring is a simple question with a complicated answer. The common—and usually correct—advice is “**don’t start too soon.**” Starting the grazing season early is a more frequent mistake than starting too late. However, every operation is different. If a producer has more forage acres than needed, they are in a unique situation compared to the more typical overstocked farm. Many producers attempt to stockpile forage to reduce winter hay usage. In Michigan, it is often more efficient to extend the grazing season into late fall and early winter than to shorten hay feeding in early spring.

MSU Forage Specialist, Kim Cassida, and Beef Educator, Kable Thurlow, authored an article, [Spring Turn-out Sets the Tone for the Entire Grazing Season](#), with excellent points about starting too soon. While legumes store energy reserves in the root structure, Grasses will store their energy reserves in the bottom portions of the stem. Grazing grass below that point will drastically slow early plant growth and likely lower yield for the entire year. Grasses can be grazed at about 4-6 inches, but should only be grazed for a short duration of no more than 24 hours and even shorter periods may be more desirable. Grazing grasses below that energy storage zone will significantly slow early growth and reduce total annual yield.



Producers with fewer animals relative to pasture acreage may have the flexibility to start grazing earlier and dip into the plants' energy reserves. While this delays recovery and early-summer growth, it may be useful in allowing longer rest periods and preventing forages from becoming overly mature in late summer and early fall. Operations near or above carrying capacity should avoid turning out too early. Beginning too soon can severely affect summer forage availability, especially in dry years. The result is often running out of grass in fall and being forced to feed hay, which is more expensive.

A more effective management practice to allow for early grazing is to ensure the pastures have adequate rest before the end of the grazing season. Pastures that have had longer rest periods at the end of the grazing season and are in healthier soils will wake-up earlier and be ready for grazing earlier than forages in compacted and plated soils and stands that are not allowed adequate rest periods.

Early grazing season observations are important to determining proper turn out times. Ideally, grass will be at the three or four leaf stage. Digging into the soil will give us some idea of the healthfulness of that soil regarding soil aggregation, soil temperature, root development and biological activity. Those observations from year to year will help us better determine the correct turnout date.

GUPAA Annual Meeting - Focus on Plant & Soil Health

By Paul Naasz



Are you interested in promoting and supporting agriculture in the Upper Peninsula? If so, the Growing U.P. Agricultural Association (GUPAA) is a way for you to become involved. GUPAA was formed in 1978 to address concerns about agricultural research in the Upper Peninsula. Through the years, the organization has continued to provide leadership for U.P. agriculture. GUPAA is tax-exempt under section 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Code which has allowed the organization to receive funds and act as the fiscal agent for grants from MDARD and other organizations. It is the goal of GUPAA to continue providing leadership and serve as an umbrella organization for all phases of agriculture in the Upper Peninsula. It currently establishes research and education priorities in crops and livestock which are utilized by MSU AgBioResearch and MSU Extension to develop research and educational programming for the UP. Every year GUPAA also recognizes an individual or organization that has provided exemplary dedication to UP agriculture and presents them with the annual "Distinguished Service to UP Agriculture" award. The first award was presented to John Kronemeyer in 1984.

GUPAA has an annual membership meeting every spring and this year's meeting is scheduled for April 8th, 11:00am-2:30pm ET at Bay de Noc Community College in Escanaba. Andrew Tucker of Nutrien Ag Solutions will be the Keynote Speaker and will give a presentation on Biologicals and their effect on plant and soil health. The agenda will include updates from MSU AgBioResearch and Extension, current research projects in the UP, a review of the research priorities, and a discussion on how GUPAA can serve UP agriculture going forward. Membership is open to anyone and those wishing to address issues and concerns facing UP agriculture are encouraged to attend. Registration cost for the meeting is \$15.00, which includes lunch. Optional GUPAA annual membership dues is an additional \$15.00. To register for the meeting, or for more information regarding membership, call Paul or Rene at 906-439-5114.

MSU Extension offers Healthy Animals, Strong Farms Trainings for Upper Peninsula Livestock Farms

By Elizabeth Ferry

Raising livestock comes with many challenges, but maintaining animal health remains one of the most important factors in building a productive and sustainable farm. Whether you raise a few animals for a direct-market farm, manage a diversified homestead, or operate a larger livestock enterprise, protecting animal health begins with strong on-farm practices. Anyone who visits your farm — from family members to veterinarians, feed suppliers and customers — can play a role in helping to protect your animals.

One of the most effective ways to protect livestock is through farm biosecurity. Biosecurity practices help prevent the introduction and spread of diseases that threaten animal health and farm profitability. These practices are especially important during disease outbreaks such as avian influenza, bovine tuberculosis and other livestock diseases that impact farms across the region.

To help farmers take practical steps toward better biosecurity, Michigan State University Extension, in partnership with the Center for Regional Food Systems, has developed a new set of resources and training opportunities specifically designed for farmers and agricultural professionals in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

These sessions will provide practical, easy-to-implement strategies that farms of all sizes can use to protect animal health and strengthen their operations. Farmers, service providers and anyone who works with livestock farms are encouraged to attend. These sessions are free to attend and will include door prizes and giveaways!

Register for upcoming training sessions

New resources at your fingertips

HEALTHY ANIMALS STRONG FARMS

Protecting animal health starts at the farm and includes anyone that may visit the farm. Knowing the steps to take to support animal health is critical for farms, farmers and visitors.



MSU Extension has also launched a new [Protecting Animal Health through Biosecurity website](#) that provides practical tools to help farmers put biosecurity into action on their farms. This site includes educational videos, articles and guides on key topics such as disease prevention, livestock health and preparing for farm visitors. Farmers can also download printable farm signage to help communicate biosecurity practices to visitors and employees.

Whether you are a farmer, veterinarian, conservation partner, lender, feed supplier, inspector or agricultural service provider, these resources are designed to help you support strong animal health practices on farms throughout the region.

Keeping animals healthy doesn’t just protect one farm — it helps protect neighboring farms, rural communities and the future of Michigan agriculture. By attending these trainings and using the available resources, you can play an important role in helping Upper Peninsula farms stay healthy, resilient and productive for years to come.

Two Locations in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula

May 5, 2026

4 p.m. – 7 p.m.

184 US-41

Negaunee, MI

Topics Include:

Health management for small farms
Parasite management
Biosecurity information
Crossing state lines – What do I really need?

May 6, 2026

9:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

St. Ignace Public Library

110 W. Spruce St.

St. Ignace, MI 49781

Topics Include:

Health management for small farms
Biosecurity information
How disease spread
Choosing the right disinfectant

[Free registration is available here](#)
[or via the QR code.](#)



Long-term Cover Cropping Can Clear the Way for Earlier Corn Planting

By Christine Charles and Madelyn Celovsky

Planting conditions are crucial to setting up for a bountiful harvest. Earlier planting can provide corn and soybean with a longer growing season leading to better yields and an earlier harvest, but the risk of cold and wet conditions that reduce seedling vigor remain high during earlier planting windows. Making the call to plant or wait is challenging enough; adding a cover crop to the mix may make those decisions even harder.

No matter the environmental benefit of cover crops, considering the impact that cover crops have on the subsequent main crop remains a driving factor in practice adoption. However, a new [University of Michigan study](#) reveals interesting patterns in cover crop use and planting dates in Michigan that may address this spring uncertainty. Etienne Sutton, PhD, lead researcher on the project, used satellite imagery of Michigan fields between 2008 and 2019 to determine how cover crops and planting dates interact. Data layers from the United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service and Landsat Satellite data were combined to analyze corn, soybean and wheat fields in Michigan's Lower Peninsula. The data was then used to classify different types of winter and early spring cover: bare/fallow, winter wheat, alfalfa hay, low biomass cover (weedy fallow or unsuccessful cover crops), and high biomass cover (successful cover crops). The model distinguishes cover crops from bare fields and other vegetation types because of distinct Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) signatures. A successful, high biomass cover crop looks "greener" to satellites. "In the past, land use data has come from survey responses or 'boots on the ground' visual surveys," Sutton explains. "Satellite imagery allows researchers to gain insight into land use and management patterns at a scale previously not feasible."

Impact of cover crop history on corn planting date

In springs with above average precipitation in April and May (more than 9 inches), planting timing can be a challenge as farmers wait for fields to dry out. With limited days to plant, it can be tempting to plant into wetter-than-ideal conditions, which can cause stress to the crop that lasts throughout the growing season. The study found that in wet springs, fields with a long-term history of cover crops were able to be planted significantly earlier than fields just starting out with cover crops. Corn fields with a cover crop history of at least three years were planted seven days earlier, on average, than fields with no history of cover crop use. Corn fields with cover crops planted for at least six years were planted 13 days earlier in wet years, on average, than fields without any prior cover crop use.

In dry springs (less than 9 inches of rain in April and May), fields with a long-term history of cover crops were planted into corn 11 days later than fields with no history of cover crops. This may be because farmers with cover crops may choose to wait longer to plant in dry years. Researchers suggest that farmers with more diversified systems tend to use adaptive management to make management decisions throughout the year. Adaptive management, or the combination of on-farm monitoring and evaluation to inform management strategies that reduce risk, may lead a farmer to wait longer for rain before planting even if this delays planting, according to research by Petersen-Rockney et al., 2021. Sutton et al., 2025 suggests that this trend may also be attributed to farmers with more cover crop experience having higher biomass goals for their cover crops, which may take longer to achieve during dry years.

Field conditions and cover crops

Cover crop impacts on spring field conditions is a topic of interest across the Midwest. Among farmers who don't use cover crops, the impact of cover crops on spring planting is a major concern. The [Conservation Technology Information Center's 2022-2023 National Cover Crop Survey](#) found that 36% of surveyed farmers not using cover crops cited fields being too wet in the spring as a major concern preventing cover crop use. Additionally, 42% of surveyed farmers not using cover crops cited cover crop water use in the spring as a major concern preventing their cover crop use. However, observations, trends and farmer experience can address these real concerns. [Practical Farmers of Iowa on-farm research](#) found that farmers with cover cropped fields reported more days suitable for fieldwork compared to their district average in 2024. They especially exceeded the number of days suitable for fieldwork in June, September and October compared to their district average. Such a large, statewide and multi-year long dataset from this study strengthens and adds nuance to these on-farm observations. Suitable days for field work are incredibly valuable during the growing season. This study demonstrates the potential for long-term cover crop usage to improve field conditions and support resilient planting windows for corn and soybeans.

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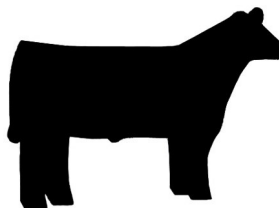
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