MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

KALKASKA COUNTY
2025-2026
ANNUAL REPORT

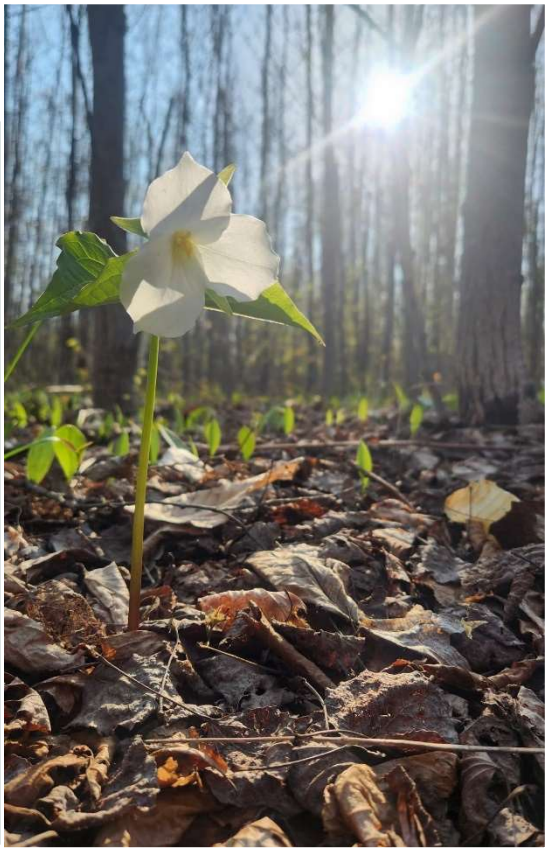

Photo Courtesy of Britney Birgy

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Message from the District Director

I am pleased to share highlights from another impactful year of partnership between Michigan State University Extension and Kalkaska County. Your continued investment ensures that residents of all ages have access to research-based education, responsive community support, and programs that strengthen the wellbeing and vitality of our region.

This year, our team continued to meet people where they are—whether in classrooms, on farms, in community spaces, or through flexible online and hybrid offerings. Because our staff live and work in the communities they serve, they remain closely connected to local needs and opportunities. That connection drives our work in youth development, agriculture and natural resources, health and nutrition, community and economic development, and lifelong learning.

Thanks to your partnership, we expanded opportunities for youth leadership and career exploration, supported families in building healthier lifestyles, strengthened local businesses, and provided farmers with tools and resources to support both economic resilience and mental health. These outcomes are a direct reflection of your commitment to fostering a thriving, informed, and connected community.

On behalf of the MSU Extension team serving our county, thank you for your ongoing trust and collaboration. We look forward to continuing this important work together and hope to see you at one of our upcoming programs or events in the year ahead.

Jennifer Berkey
District 3 Director
Michigan State University Extension

Impact

108
Programs accessed by residents

1,014
Reached through programming

179,300
Reached by social media

AGRICULTURE PROGRAM













AgBioResearch
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

NORTHWEST MICHIGAN GROWER BUS TOUR

In March 2025, the Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Center (NWMHRC) staff organized a tour to West Central Michigan and the Ridge. The goal of this tour was to showcase technology on fruit farms around the state. The bus departed from the NWMHRC at 7am with over 70 growers on a chartered bus. Our first stop was in Hart, Michigan where we had a high-density apple pruning demonstration and highlighted top-worked Honeycrisp trees. At our second stop, the grower had used a Vivid X Vision system to estimate yields and bins per acre. This technology is mounted to an ATV, and research conducted by MSU researchers showed that this equipment helps growers achieve a tighter estimate for annual yields. We looked at a large planting of high-density sweet cherries under rain covers and had a pruning demonstration of this orchard system. We toured a sweet cider processing plant and saw a new line for packing fresh market sweet cherries. The tour ended with a stop highlighting a new irrigation system—the first of its kind installed in Michigan—with water delivery and scheduling managed through the cloud and accessed by smartphone. In addition to the 70 Northwest Michigan growers on the bus, local growers from West Central Michigan and the Ridge joined at each site, for a total of over 150 attendees.

NEW PATHOLOGY EQUIPMENT AT NWMHRC

In fall 2025, the Northwest Michigan Horticulture Research Center (NWMHRC) purchased new laboratory equipment to expand its capacity for in-depth plant pathology research and testing. This investment strengthens research on critical apple diseases such as fire blight and apple scab, as well as cherry diseases including cherry leaf spot, American brown rot, and bacterial canker.

New equipment includes a laminar airflow workstation, benchtop autoclave, microbiological incubator, centrifuge, and other essential tools. These additions allow researchers to prepare sterile media on site and culture fungal and bacterial pathogens, supporting work with multiple diseases and testing for pesticide resistance in pathogens collected from local orchards.

This capacity is especially important given survey results from 2016–2019 showing widespread resistance to key SDHI fungicides used in commercial tart cherry production. Access to current disease and resistance data helps growers make informed management decisions to protect yield and crop quality. The enhanced laboratory will serve as an off-campus hub for tree fruit plant pathology research supporting the region's agricultural industry.

AGRICULTURE PROGRAM









*Each year, Rothwell and her staff open the research center during the National Cherry Festival, welcoming more than **2,500 visitors** to learn about cherry production*

IRRIGATION UPDATE AT THE NW STATION

In 2024, the Michigan Tree Fruit Commission awarded the NWMHRC funds to update the irrigation system. This spring, we were excited to start the install of the new WiseConn Irrgation system. Our old irrigation system was starting to wear out and the automated technology was outdated.

WiseConn is a relatively new technology, that some growers across Michigan are starting to adopt. It is categorized as a "smart irrigation system," as it provides precision drip and sprinkler irrigation solutions, combining hardware (valves, controllers, sensors) with cloud-based software for monitoring, analytics and scheduling. They also integrate with other agritech platforms (e.g. CropX), so data from soil moisture, weather, sensors, etc., can feed into decision-making. We are in the process of connecting our WiseConn Irrigation system to our Enviroweather Station, so it can use real-time data to drive irrigation decisions.

Because the system uses real- time data (soil moisture, weather, flow, etc.) to schedule irrigation, it delivers the right amount of water, only when needed. That minimizes waste from overwatering or running irrigation during rain.

The NWMHRC's Farm Manager, Dan Bacheler, worked with Whitewater Irrigation and WiseConn to install this new system. Dan is in the process of learning how to operate and best utilize this new system and is excited about being able to automate irrigation timing remotely. We are excited about all the potential projects this new system may introduce.

This system is coming just at the right time. We have three new irrigation projects that are ongoing at the station: two in high-density apples and one in tart cherries. As we have light soils in northern Michigan and rainfall has become more erratic, dialing in the best water delivery will be critical to produce high quality crops.

We are also fortunate to have a newer MSU faculty, Dr. Younsuk Dong, on board to collaborate on our new irrigation trials. Dr. Dong received a Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and MSU collaboration grant to address climate resiliency. The new apple irrigation trials are supported through this innovative program. We look forward to some great data on best practices for watering and fertigation of fresh market apples.

Thank you to the Michigan Tree Fruit Commission for their support in this project! Thanks also to the Climate Resiliency program for funding innovative irrigation research!

Nikki Rothwell 2025 Cherry Industry Person of the Year

Nikki Rothwell, an MSU Extension specialist and coordinator of the NWMHRC, was named the 2025 Cherry Industry Person of the Year, one of the industry's highest honors. A trusted leader in Michigan's cherry industry for decades, Rothwell is recognized for her impactful research, innovative pest and disease management strategies, and unwavering commitment to grower education and support. Her work has fundamentally improved cherry production practices, including leading efforts that transformed management of spotted wing drosophila, while her outreach, adaptability, and leadership during times of industry need have made her an indispensable advocate for growers and the broader cherry community.

AGRICULTURE PROGRAM









Farms Assisted Represent:

$19.7M in net worth

$4.7M in annual sales

FARM BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Farm Business Management Educator Chris Bardenhagen works with area farmers on succession planning, financial management, and cost of production (farm-level and industry-level). Most farmers faced mounting difficulties this year, including ever-growing input costs, trade volatility, and in some cases, overproduction leading to weak prices. These issues make farm planning very difficult, and so consultations with MSU Extension Farm Business Management advisors are even more important and valuable in these challenging times.

Chris assisted nine area farms with TelFarm program outreach this year, helping to determine end-of-year tax strategies and to perform annual balance sheet financial analysis. Farmers who participate in the program gain a greater understanding of their farm's financial strengths and weaknesses, and how they can improve their financial standing. This in turn helps improve the farms' resilience. The aggregate net worth of the farm businesses that Chris assisted is over $19.7 million dollars, and these farms had over $4.7 million dollars in sales in 2025.

Chris also consulted with many growers and other industry actors related to recently finished industry cost of production studies. Along with regional MSU Extension educators, Chris completed four Michigan studies in 2025: Apples, blueberries, cabbage, and peaches. Chris and Erin Lizotte have also been working with the chestnut industry on a cost study, as this is a potential alternative crop for tree fruit growers. Growers can use these studies as a decision-making tool, adjusting the spreadsheet and tables to consider different planning scenarios.

This year, Chris also consulted with many area farmers regarding important decisions relating to farm transfer plans. Succession planning is a hot topic with farmers right now, and Chris is connected with more than 12 farm families. He also regularly presents the topic at local, regional, and state-level events. Succession planning tools and resources equip farm families to make informed choices to successfully transfer business skills, responsibilities, and assets to the next farming generation.

Advised **12+ farm families** in planning for the next generation

AGRICULTURE PROGRAM











MICHIGAN AGRABILITY

The Michigan AgrAbility project helps people who want to continue working in agriculture even when illness, injury, or chronic conditions create barriers to work. AgrAbility is a USDA-funded partnership between MSU Extension and Easterseals MORC, with a mission to enhance quality of life so that farmers, their families, and communities can thrive, using assistive devices and adaptive equipment that makes farming safer and easier on the body.

In 2025, Michigan AgrAbility coordinated two events with client partners: a farm visit field day in Holland and a maple tubing installation day in Newberry. The field day brought together staff from Michigan Rehabilitation Services, the Michigan Center for Rural Health, Kent County Farm Bureau, and Extension to demonstrate the adaptive items that allow Mr. VerHoeven to safely use his equipment and successfully farm 90 acres. The tubing installation day took place on Veteran's Day at a veteran's farm and provided hands-on training on how to make a small-scale maple sugar operation easier on the body by using tubing instead of lugging heavy buckets of sap across the snow.

The project also provided guidance to two MSU College of Engineering Mechanical Engineering Capstone projects: making improvements to a previous design group's rolling kneeler cart prototype to help a client tend low-growing lavender while protecting her fragile foot bones and an arm support addition to an exoskeleton that could be useful for anyone who had experienced a stroke or injury affecting one arm so that they can lift and do overhead work such as pruning.

Throughout the year, the team worked with 164 clients at their farms and collaborated with Michigan Rehabilitation Services to provide equipment such as quick-attach hitches, lifts on tractors and combines, and cattle handling systems to 22 farmers across the state. AgrAbility also worked with Easterseals MORC to provide $9,500 in donations to cover equipment for 12 farmers such as hand control levers, an air ride seat and an electric wheelchair, improvements that will make their work safer and easier on the body. Former clients also donated nine items back to the program, amounting to nearly $30,000 worth of equipment that is back in use.

Staff had great presence around the state and provided 21 presentations, tabled at nine events, and had 341 direct interactions, from a total of more than 7,550 participants present at events.

AGRICULTURE PROGRAM











FARM STRESS

Farming remains one of the most unpredictable and stressful professions in Michigan. Through the MSU Extension Managing Farm Stress Program, we continue to combine farm business expertise with behavioral health support to strengthen the resilience of agricultural communities. Program leadership is based in our Benzie County office, allowing for responsive local engagement alongside statewide delivery. In 2025, the program led 74 training workshops, reaching more than 1,700 participants statewide, with measurable improvements in participants' confidence to manage their own stress and to support farmers experiencing distress. Workshops are offered at community libraries and partner sites, including evenings and weekends, to improve accessibility for producers.

Local organizations interested in hosting a program are encouraged to contact their county office.
Our other efforts included updated curricula, expanded media outreach, and release of the short documentary Weathering Together to explore the effect of stress on Michigan farmers and raise awareness of available resources.

Scan to view the short documentary
Weathering Together

In 2025, the Farm Stress program:

Led more than **74 training workshops**

Reached over **1,700 participants**

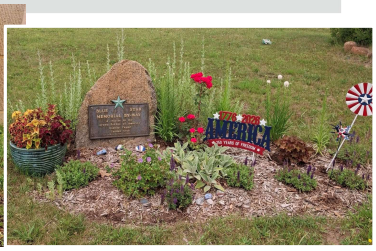
MASTER GARDENER AND GOOD GOVERNANCE



DEEP ROOTS IN OUR COMMUNITY

Elodie "Dee" Crawford puts her Extension Master Gardener knowledge to work throughout the region. An active member of Kalkaska's Quality Thyme Garden Club, Dee helps maintain the Blue Star Memorial flower beds along the KART Trail and supports education and stewardship at Grass River Natural Area. Her years of volunteer service demonstrate how Extension knowledge can grow into lasting community impact.







EXTENSION MASTER GARDENER

The MSU Extension Master Gardener (EMG) Volunteer Program offers residents an opportunity to turn a passion for gardening into research-based knowledge and community service. The program is now offered online, allowing participants to complete the educational requirements at their own pace and on their own schedule. Kalkaska residents also have access to additional support through the EMG program director, who is based in the neighboring Antrim County MSU Extension office. Kalkaska County is home to Elodie "Dee" Crawford, an Advanced EMG who has been part of the program since 2005. Dee has contributed more than 482 volunteer hours and 209 education hours to projects promoting native plants, conservation, invasive species management, and environmental education throughout the region. Her experience demonstrates the lasting impact Extension volunteers can have in their communities.

LOCAL POLICY EDUCATION

In 2025, the Community, Food and Environment Institute (CFEI) of MSU Extension supported Kalkaska County and surrounding communities through education, facilitation, and resources focused on local government and community decision-making. As communities across Michigan seek clarity on short-term rental (STR) policy options, Kalkaska County served as one of nine statewide classroom sites for MSU Extension's STR training. The October 7 session, led by Mary Reilly, MS, AICP, brought 23 local officials, staff, and residents together at the Kaliseum to explore policy options, legal considerations, and decision-making frameworks. Statewide evaluations showed that 96.4% of respondents increased their knowledge of STR policy options, while 92.6% found the training valuable.

Kalkaska County also benefits from having CFEI Educator Bethany Prykucki based in the Kalkaska office, providing access to expertise in governance, planning, facilitation, and public engagement. CFEI also facilitated a community engagement process with a township bordering Kalkaska County as it considered STR policy, creating opportunities for residents to share perspectives and engage in structured dialogue. These services can help communities navigate complex issues—from STRs and housing to land use, parks, infrastructure, and renewable energy—and make informed, transparent decisions.

TOUGH QUESTIONS. LOCAL DECISIONS. EXPERT GUIDANCE.

Short-term rentals are creating new policy questions for communities across Michigan. MSU Extension helps local leaders navigate these complex issues with research-based information, expert guidance, and practical tools—so communities can make informed decisions based on their own needs and priorities.

4-H PROGRAM







> ***"Of all the things my pig gave me, the meat was the least important and of all the things I got from the fair, the ribbons were the least important."***
>
> *-Abby, age 10*
> *Reflecting on her first 4-H and fair experiences*



4-H LIVESTOCK 2026

The 2026 Kalkaska County Fair marked another successful year for the county's 4-H livestock program. A total of 90 youth ages 5 to 19 participated in livestock clubs throughout the year, with 72 exhibitors showcasing their project animals at the fair. Many of these exhibitors were first-time 4-H members, reflecting continued interest and growth in livestock project opportunities. Youth competed in a variety of showmanship and market classes, demonstrating the knowledge, responsibility, and dedication required to raise and care for their animals.

Community support remained exceptionally strong during the 4-H Livestock Auction, where 82 animals were marketed. Auction sales reached an impressive $153,081.75, representing an approximately 15% increase over 2025 sales. This growth comes on the heels of the substantial increase experienced the previous year, highlighting a continuing trend of investment in Kalkaska County's 4-H youth. Several livestock species also commanded sale prices that exceeded those seen in neighboring counties, including Grand Traverse County. These strong sale results reflect the tremendous support provided by local businesses, community members, and families who recognize the value of 4-H livestock projects and youth development opportunities.

This year's fair also offered a unique opportunity for livestock exhibitors due to the Kalkaska County Fair Board's efforts to revitalize the fair experience. With new daily attractions and evening grandstand events drawing larger crowds to the fairgrounds, foot traffic through the livestock barns increased significantly. As a result, 4-H youth had more opportunities than ever before to interact with fairgoers, answer questions about their projects, and educate the public about animal agriculture and livestock production.

In addition to exhibiting and marketing their animals, livestock participants completed market record books documenting animal care, feed records, expenses, and project goals. Through educational workshops, livestock clinics, fairground work bees, and fair participation, youth developed valuable skills in leadership, communication, recordkeeping, and animal science. MSU Extension and 4-H are excited about the enhanced fair experience and the opportunities that increased community engagement will continue to provide for youth in the years ahead.

The continued growth of the livestock program, combined with strong auction participation and increased public engagement at the fair, reflects the dedication of Kalkaska County residents and businesses to supporting local youth. Their investment helps build leadership, responsibility, communication skills, and agricultural knowledge that will benefit participants for years to come.



4-H PROGRAM



4-H LIVESTOCK EDUCATIONAL CLINIC

Preparing youth for success in the show ring begins long before fair week. In May 2026, Kalkaska County 4-H hosted a Livestock Showmanship Clinic focused on poultry, rabbits, sheep, and goats. Sixteen youth participated in the clinic, with several attending sessions for multiple species.

Participants received hands-on instruction covering proper animal care, showmanship techniques, and tips for preparing both themselves and their animals for competition at the Kalkaska County Fair. Each participant also received a species-specific binder filled with valuable educational resources on animal management, recordkeeping, and fair preparation.

A special thank you goes to Abigail and Sandi Pyle for sharing their knowledge and expertise with local youth. Their dedication helped exhibitors build confidence, improve their skills, and gain a stronger understanding of the responsibilities involved in livestock projects. Educational opportunities like this clinic play an important role in helping 4-H members develop the knowledge, leadership, and life skills that contribute to success both in and out of the show ring.

4-H SCHOLARSHIPS 2025

Kalkaska County 4-H is proud to recognize outstanding youth who have demonstrated years of dedication, leadership, and personal growth through their 4-H experiences. To be eligible for these scholarships, applicants must be active 4-H members with at least five years of participation and complete an application highlighting their achievements, leadership experiences, community involvement, and future goals.

The 2026 Duke Hill Memorial Scholarship was awarded to Jackson Shetler, a 12-year 4-H member whose experiences raising pigs, turkeys, and rabbits helped develop a strong work ethic, leadership skills, and a commitment to service. Growing up on a dairy farm, Jackson learned responsibility through caring for animals and helping with daily farm operations. He plans to attend Northwestern Michigan College this fall.

The 2026 Kalkaska County 4-H Leader's Association Scholarships were awarded to Myah Little and Ryley Allen. Myah has been active in 4-H for 11 years and participated in rabbit, turkey, goat, and swine projects. She credits 4-H with helping her develop confidence, communication skills, and leadership abilities and plans to attend Grand Rapids Community College. Ryley Allen was recognized for her dedication to livestock projects, including swine and poultry, as well as her willingness to mentor younger members. Through 4-H, she developed strong skills in responsibility, leadership, and perseverance. Ryley plans to continue her education in the nursing field.

These scholarships are made possible through the generous support of the Kalkaska County 4-H Leader's Association, the Michigan 4-H Foundation, and the family of Duke Hill. Their continued investment helps prepare local youth for success in college, careers, and their communities.

4-H PROGRAM















2026 4-H SOCCER

Kalkaska County 4-H Soccer experienced an exciting year of growth and positive program adaptation. With new parent volunteer leadership, the program transitioned from one combined spring-and-fall season to two completely separate seasons, each with its own registration, coaches, team assignments, and community sponsors. This change allowed staff and volunteers to better respond to the different scheduling needs of youth and families throughout the year. The Spring 2026 season included 82 youth ages 5–12 and nine volunteer coaches, with twice-weekly practices and Saturday games. For Fall 2026, 77 youth and eight coaches participated, with practices reduced to once a week and games moved to Sunday mornings to accommodate youth football and other fall activities. Teams are also redistributed each season to balance ages and experience, helping keep competition fair and teams well matched.

Our new volunteer leadership brought tremendous energy to the program, raising funds to purchase six new goal frames and nets, corner posts, team benches, balls, and a new field line painter as well as securing community jersey sponsors for all 17 teams, allowing every team to be fully sponsored in both seasons. Their enthusiasm, along with the dedication of our coaches and community partners, has strengthened the program and contributed to positive experiences and feedback from youth and families. Through 4-H Soccer, youth build soccer skills while developing teamwork, sportsmanship, confidence, friendships, and lifelong healthy habits.

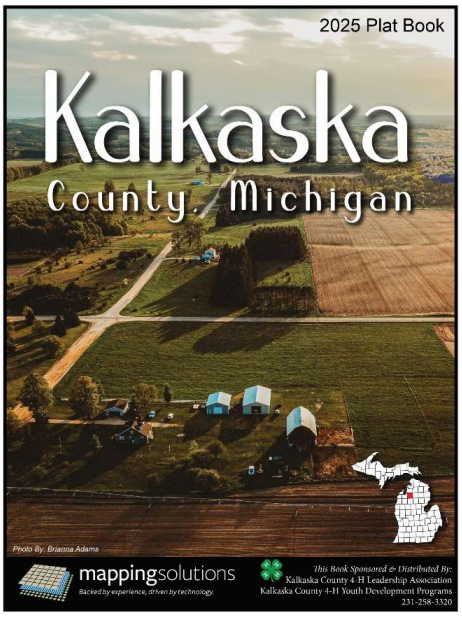


2026 4-H ARCHERY

The Kalkaska 4-H Archery Club continues to be one of the county's most in-demand programs, maxing out registration each year with 33 youth participating in 2026. Longtime volunteer leaders from the Kalkaska County Sheriff's Department continue to provide instruction, mentorship, and a strong partnership with MSU Extension, creating a safe and supportive environment where youth develop archery skills while building focus, patience, discipline, confidence, and respect.

This year, the program received an archery curtain from the Michigan State 4-H Shooting Sports Board, providing greater flexibility to host events and utilize additional facilities in the future. The continued commitment of our longtime volunteers and strong support from community partners demonstrate the lasting value and growing impact of 4-H Archery in Kalkaska County.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH











2025 KALKASKA COUNTY PLAT BOOKS

The Kalkaska 4-H Leader's Association released the 2025 Kalkaska County Plat Book in November 2025, replacing the previous 2021 edition just in time for Michigan's firearm deer season. Nearly 200 books have been sold in the past year, demonstrating that there continues to be strong demand for a hard-copy plat book among Kalkaska County residents, landowners, hunters, and visitors. Thanks to a multi-year publishing contract secured in 2021, the 2025 edition remains available at the affordable price of $35.

Plat books are sold through the MSU Extension office and several community partners, including the Kalkaska County Register of Deeds, Kalkaska County Library, McLean's Hardware, and the Kalkaska County Conservation District. The project provides a valuable resource for the community while generating funds for the Kalkaska 4-H Leader's Association to support 4-H programs and opportunities for local youth. The continued sales of the 2025 edition demonstrate the value of maintaining access to a reliable, locally produced hard-copy resource while also creating a sustainable source of support for 4-H.

MAPLE SUGARING

After a one-year hiatus, 4-H staff were excited to partner again with the SEEDS after-school program at Forest Area Middle School to bring maple sugaring back to local youth. Twenty-four youth, including 13 from Kalkaska County, participated in the hands-on experience from start to finish. Students learned to identify and tap maple trees, collected and boiled sap, bottled the finished syrup, and enjoyed pancakes together at the end of the season. The group tapped 30 trees and spent multiple days boiling sap, ultimately producing approximately seven gallons of maple syrup.

This experiential program gave youth an opportunity to learn about local natural resources and the maple sugaring process while developing teamwork, perseverance, and an appreciation for the work that goes into producing a local agricultural product.

MSU EXTENSION GAME, PUZZLE & ACTIVITY LENDING LIBRARY

As part of an after-school grant program at the Kaliseum Recreation Complex, where the MSU Extension office is located, the Kalkaska office created a Game, Puzzle & Activity Lending Library to provide youth with screen-free opportunities to socialize and engage with their peers while waiting for parents. The puzzles and puzzle board quickly became the most popular items, and a puzzle now sits outside the MSU Extension office in the Kaliseum lobby. Youth, parents, and community members of all ages regularly stop to add a few pieces, visit with others, or simply take a quiet break. What began as a resource for after-school youth has become an unexpected gathering point that encourages connection and engagement throughout the Kaliseum community.

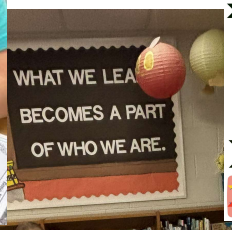
CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH















"It felt kind of like school...but funner. And the reason I say it was kind of like school is because I'm pretty sure you snuck some learning in...but it was still really fun."
-3rd grade camper reflecting on day camp

2026 4-H SPRING BREAK DAY CAMP AT CAMP GREILICK

In March 2026, 4-H brought its first youth program to Camp Greilick County Park, in partnership with MSU Extension staff from Grand Traverse and Kalkaska counties. Fourteen youth participated in the two-day spring break camp, including four from Kalkaska County. Kalkaska-based 4-H Outdoor Education Educator Joe Kreider helped organize the program and led activities on site, where youth explored maple sugaring, fire building, hiking, bouldering, art, and more. Community partners, including Michigan Legacy Art Park and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, added additional educational experiences.

Though a small pilot, the camp was a resounding success with youth and families and opened the door to future 4-H programming and partnerships at the new county park.

By being the first organization to offer youth programming at Camp Greilick, 4-H is well positioned to be a valuable partner as Grand Traverse County develops the site and expands opportunities for the community.

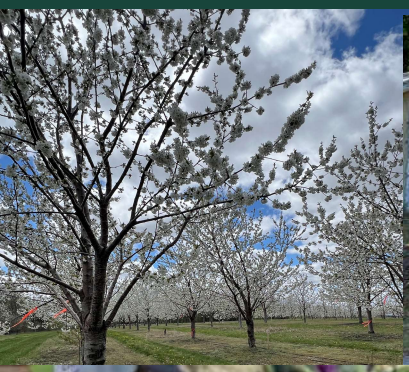
KALKASKA UPPER ELEMENTARY AND SEEDS COLLABORATION

Through a collaborative SEEDS program at Kalkaska Upper Elementary School, over 100 students engaged in hands-on learning experiences that connected art, nature, and science. K-2nd grade students participated in a creative community art project led by Bethany Prykucki, inspired by the Michigan Legacy Art Park's Quilts! installation. Students learned about quilt design and worked together to create individual wooden quilt blocks that contributed to a larger collaborative art project. The activity encouraged creativity, teamwork, and an appreciation for how individual contributions can become part of a larger community artwork.

In addition, a group of K-2nd grade students and a seperate group of students in grades 3-5 explored the fascinating world of owls through an owl pellet investigation led by Joe Kreider, MSU Extension 4-H Outdoor Education Educator. Students examined real owl pellets to discover what owls eat and learned about food chains, predator-prey relationships, and wildlife adaptations. The hands-on scientific investigation sparked curiosity and gave students an opportunity to practice observation and discovery skills.

By combining art, environmental education, and experiential learning, the program provided opportunities for students to explore new interests, build critical thinking skills, and strengthen their connection to the natural world. The collaboration highlighted the value of community partnerships in bringing engaging educational experiences to youth.

PRODUCT CENTER








MSU PRODUCT CENTER BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

The Michigan State University Product Center supports entrepreneurs in Northwest Michigan who are launching, developing, or growing businesses in food, agriculture, natural resources, and related industries. Through its Traverse City-based innovation counselor, the Product Center provides personalized guidance in areas such as business planning, market research, feasibility analysis, product development, regulatory considerations, packaging and labeling, and strategies for bringing products to market.

In 2025, MSU Product Center staff worked with two Kalkaska County entrepreneurs, supporting more than $17,000 in capital formation. This year, local residents brought the Extension office a variety of unique business ideas, including plans to expand an online business into a brick-and-mortar plant shop offering traditional plant sales along with custom soil blends, plant-sitting services, and rehabilitation of struggling plants. Another entrepreneur was interested in building on the popularity of freeze-dried candy by developing a business focused on healthier freeze-dried treats. Both were connected with the Product Center and its introductory seminar to begin receiving individualized business development assistance.

These examples demonstrate the range of ideas that can benefit from MSU Extension's connection to the Product Center—from food and value-added products to agriculture, retail, and innovative service-based businesses. By helping entrepreneurs connect with specialized expertise and resources early in the development process, the Product Center helps turn local ideas into viable businesses while contributing to economic development and a more resilient, community-based food system in Kalkaska County and throughout the region.

KALKASKA COUNTY PRODUCT CENTER IMPACTS

- **2** Businesses
- **1** Counseling Hour
- **Over $17,000** in annual sales (combined)
- **3** total employees

MEET YOUR KALKASKA COUNTY EXTENSION TEAM

JOSEPH KREIDER



4-H Outdoor Education & Shooting Sports Educator

Based in the Kalkaska MSU Extension office, Joe Kreider provides leadership and expertise that reaches far beyond Kalkaska County. As Michigan's statewide 4-H Shooting Sports educator, he coordinates instructor trainings, the Michigan 4-H Shooting Sports State Tournament, and opportunities for youth to compete nationally. He is also a leader of the annual Great Lakes and Natural Resources Camp, where youth develop leadership, environmental stewardship, and outdoor skills through hands-on learning experiences.

Joe is known for creating engaging educational experiences that challenge young people to think critically and work as a team. One example is a survival challenge he developed in which participants use outdoor knowledge, problem-solving, and limited resources to navigate real-world scenarios. Behind the scenes, Joe also helps develop and implement statewide safety practices for 4-H camps, including transportation, health services, emergency response, water safety, and volunteer training. Through partnerships with organizations such as SEEDS, Michigan Outdoor Legacy Park, Forest Area Schools, and Camp Greilick, he continues to expand outdoor education opportunities for youth across northern Michigan and throughout the state.

BETHANY PRYKUCKI

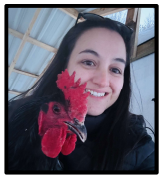


Leadership, Community Engagement, and Government and Policy Educator

Based in the Kalkaska MSU Extension office, Bethany Prykucki provides leadership, governance, facilitation, and community development education to communities and organizations across Michigan. She works with local governments, nonprofit boards, and community organizations on effective meetings, parliamentary procedure, communication, conflict resolution, strategic planning, and community engagement. During election cycles, she also teaches New Commissioner Training, helping newly elected county commissioners understand their roles and responsibilities in local government.

Bethany is a lead instructor for MSU Extension's Tools for Effective Facilitation and Communicating Through Conflict programs and teaches Citizen Planner. Her expertise in facilitation and collaborative planning also extends nationally through training with the Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command (NAVFAC). Working with colleagues from the National Charette Institute, she has traveled nationally to train architects, engineers, planners, and other professionals in leading collaborative processes and engaging diverse stakeholders. Bethany also serves as a First Impressions Tourism assessor, helping rural communities identify opportunities to strengthen tourism and community vitality. Through her local, statewide, and national work, she helps people navigate complex issues, strengthen leadership, and work effectively together.

JESSICA STEINBERGER



4-H Staff

Jessica (Jessi) Steinberger joined the Kalkaska County MSU Extension team in December 2025 and quickly became a key resource for local 4-H youth, families, and volunteers. During her first year, she guided families through the livestock project season and FairEntry process, supported educational clinics, assisted new members, and helped navigate the many moving parts of a successful fair season. Jessi also led a redesign of the county's 4-H soccer program, working with parent volunteers to create a new leadership team and secure funding for equipment and field improvements. She helped recruit and onboard new Gold and Silver Volunteers, helped plan the annual 4-H Leaders Association Spaghetti Dinner, and represented 4-H at community events including Blazer Bash and the National Trout Festival Parade. Through her enthusiasm, creativity, and dedication, Jessi has strengthened 4-H programs and expanded opportunities for youth and volunteers in Kalkaska County.

KIM TANNER



Office Manager

Kim Tanner serves as the Office Manager for the Kalkaska County MSUE office, providing support for educators, volunteers, youth, and community members across local Extension programs. From managing social media, creating flyers, newspaper ads, signage, flip charts and program materials to coordinating meetings, registrations, and office operations, Kim helps ensure programs run smoothly behind the scenes.

Often the first face visitors meet in the office, Kim connects residents and 4-H families with the resources, experts, and answers they need, whether they are looking for gardening information, starting a farm stand, purchasing soil test kits, or preparing livestock projects for fair. Drawing on her interior design and education background, she enjoys finding creative solutions that are both functional and welcoming. In 2025, Kim established a Board Game and Puzzle Lending Library as a device-free option for youth in the after school program at the Kaliseum.

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