



U.P. Ag Connections Newsletter

September 2026

Agricultural News from MSU Extension and AgBioResearch

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- Upcoming Events

Many places across the Upper Peninsula are experiencing drought again this year. The National Drought Monitor indicates three Eastern UP counties, five Western UP counties and Menominee county are abnormally dry. Gogebic and Ontonagon Counties also have areas at moderate and severe drought. When I see some of the farms that are experiencing only moderate drought, I cannot help but think how bad it can be when you look farther west and realize some of those areas are classified as extreme or exceptional drought. You then understand why so many cow-calf pairs were sold this summer because they simply do not have enough forage to feed them. Current beef cattle prices are sending every signal they can to the American cattlemen to start building this herd. However, Mother Nature has not provided enough precipitation to allow that to happen.

Over the past several years, I have written in this newsletter about drought management strategies. Earlier this year, I wrote about trying to manage our soils so that they can become more resilient to drought. Some of the areas listed as abnormally dry or with varying degrees of drought have had some heavy rainfall. However, too frequently the rain has come in downpours of short duration. I've heard many farmers saying what we really need is a good, long soaking rain that lasts all day. Unfortunately, Mother Nature has not cooperated that way. In my discussions of developing resilient soils, I've talked about having soils that allow infiltration of water at a rapid rate. Also, those soils that have can absorb water rapidly also have the ability to hold more water.

Kable Thurlow and I are currently working on a project to demonstrate some of those management practices to help develop improved soil health using grazing management practices. The main part of that project is using six demonstration farms across the state, three in the Upper Peninsula and three in the lower. We're comparing a long rest period between grazing events of about 90 days to normal rest timing of a standard rotation that may be 30 to 45 days. Of course, we will not know the results until we get through the end of the second year; but right now, I believe with the current dry conditions that we're experiencing we will see improvement in soil health and water dynamics with longer rest periods. I am expecting more root growth coupled with improved and deeper soil aggregation. I am not saying that long rest periods in between

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grazing events are a silver bullet, but it's one of many things that we can do to help improve soil health and resilience. At a recent Upper Peninsula Research and Extension Center field day, they demonstrated a rainfall simulator. If you have not seen this demonstration, the rainfall simulator is an incredibly eye-opening experience. I grew up on a large cash crop & livestock operation in Illinois. We tilled every acre of cropland every year and I always believed that the tillage helped loosen the soil to allow for water infiltration. I have since learned that it's exactly the opposite. I've also been using a rainfall simulator at events to illustrate the differences of water infiltration across various soils. I recently used the rainfall simulator at the Houghton Keweenaw County Conservation Jubilee. I had three samples: a well-managed pasture, a poorly managed pasture, and a tilled soil out of a garden. I used an amount of water which would be equivalent to one inch of rain. The well-managed pasture allowed water to infiltrate rapidly with some clear runoff. The poorly managed pasture allowed very little infiltration and the runoff was clear. The tilled soil allowed some infiltration but had a lot of runoff that was very dirty. After the demonstration, I tore the soil samples apart, which were about six inches deep. The well-managed pasture had moist soil all the way through the six inches. The poorly managed pasture and the tilled soil only had moisture penetrate the top one inch of soil, or so. Like I said, it is so eye-opening when you see that demonstration.

It seems every year we are so worried about whether or not we're going to get enough rain. I think droughts should be a rare occurrence but it's not that way. Droughts seem to be commonplace now and there's always a portion of the country that is in extreme drought. I know I sound like a soil health thumper, but it just seems to me that it's critical that we start managing soils to become more resilient.

Food Futures Expo, By Alex Palzewicz

Thursday, October 15th, 2026 from 4:30-6pm at the Mather Inn in Ishpeming, Michigan

In 2024, myself (Northwoods Test Kitchen), Partridge Creek Farm, Michigan State University Extension, Marquette Alger Regional Education Service Agency and Chartwells (Negaunee & Ishpeming School Food Service) collaborated on and received an Innovation Collaborative Award from the [Lake Michigan School Food System Innovation Hub](#) which we named: **Food Futures**.



In the last three years, we've been so lucky to collaborate not only with each other, but with a grocery list of folks locally and around the Great Lakes learning about what it takes to get local food in the lunch room in our region. We want to provide an opportunity to celebrate and thank everyone, as well as share a snapshot of what we've learned - and most importantly, get into a room together to network, dream and collaborate further.

Things we'll be celebrating & highlighting:

- Local food taste tests in schools and food stories series at Ishpeming High School
- LIFT-UP (Locally Integrated Food Teams in the UP), which gives students a voice in their school food via mini-grants
- Local food production, procurement and processing
- Our visit to Muskegon Area Career Tech Center, Valley Hub Food Innovation Center and The Good Acre food hub
- Our trip to Minneapolis Public Schools, North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems (NATIFS) Indigenous Food Lab
- A short viewing (first time showing) of a film about this grant and students, produced by Upper Productions Media

I know making it will be hard for many of you who live far away or have multiple moving parts this time of year - but please know that this invite is also our way of recognizing how truly thankful we are for everyone's time and work on these projects, and our collective positive impact on the community and school food.

If you have questions, please direct them to myself, Alex Palzewicz: northwoodstestkitchen@gmail.com

Agricultural producers can share their input in the Midwest Farm Conservation Survey

By Ana Heck

[Pollinator Partnership](#) is collaborating with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to survey Midwestern agricultural producers in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio and Wisconsin. The goal of the survey is to better understand producer preferences related to on-farm conservation programs, including the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

Pollinator Partnership requests Midwestern agricultural producers to [take the Midwest Farm Conservation Survey](#), regardless of whether they have participated in USDA or other conservation programs. This voluntary survey takes about 15 minutes to complete. Anonymous responses will help Pollinator Partnership advise the USDA on how it can best support Midwest growers in creating habitat on farms and help influence future conservation program updates.

Input from agricultural producers is essential in helping Pollinator Partnership gather meaningful input from producers and strengthen pollinator-friendly conservation efforts across the Midwest. Please direct questions about the survey to Jordan Phelps at jordan@pollinator.org or Vicki Wojcik at vw@pollinator.org.



Building Safety into the Everyday Rhythm of Agricultural Work

By Sammanie Prematillaka and Laurel Harduar Morano

There is a rhythm to farm work with everyday activities being very familiar. However, familiar does not mean risk-free. Between the years 2022–2023, MSU’s Division of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (OEM) identified 35 deaths and 892 non-fatal injuries to individuals working on Michigan farm. Keeping safety at the forefront of daily farm work through planning, regular safety conversations and attention to changing hazards can help prevent injuries before they happen.

Case study: A routine feeding task turns fatal

The following incident is a powerful reminder that serious farm injuries can happen during routine tasks, especially when unsafe conditions or work practices become familiar over time.

On a cold day early in the morning, [a dairy head milker](#) was walking on a driveway toward a barn while carrying a container of diesel fuel. He was wearing earmuff-style headphones and non-reflective clothing. His co-worker was nearby driving a wheel loader carrying a bucket of waste feed. While the loader’s four forward-facing headlights were on, they were obstructed by the bucket, which was raised about three feet off the ground. As the loader drove forward, it struck the head milker and he died.

Incidents like the one above are avoidable. Having a farm safety plan helps with prevention.

Turning routine tasks into safer routines

To protect your workers, family members and yourself, it is important to deliberately incorporate safety into the rhythm of your farm. The first step is to identify hazards. Walk through your farm and identify hazards by task, equipment and work area. Also think about the times when an injury could have occurred but didn’t (near miss) as well as past injuries that could have been a lot worse. Then decide which hazards need attention first and what changes could be made to reduce the risk. For instance, if a [tractor can only be started while standing on the ground](#), then there is a strong possibility of being run over by the tractor.

After identifying hazards, the second step is to make changes and develop policies/procedures that make safety part of routine work. For example, [repairing or replacing broken/worn equipment](#); [retrofitting unguarded PTO drivelines](#); or when working alone [establishing a check in procedure](#) with another individual to ensure prompt emergency assistance.

Education and training, the third step, are important for reinforcing farm safety expectations and helping workers understand how to recognize hazards and use safe work practices. Longer trainings, such as sessions offered at meetings, MSU Extension programs or by employers, provide time to build knowledge and practice around broader safety topics. Day-of trainings, such as [toolbox or tailgate talks \(in Spanish\)](#), are equally important because they keep safety at the forefront of the specific tasks being performed that day. They also give workers an opportunity to discuss changing conditions, equipment concerns or other immediate hazards before work begins.

Finally, evaluation is essential to make sure the safety plan is working. Regularly review whether policies, procedures and training are being followed. Ask workers for feedback on procedures or training needs. Use near misses, injuries or changing work conditions to identify where additional improvements may be needed.

Find the right resource to help you

MSU OEM has created a bank of resources that can help farmers identify hazards, learn from past incidents, and make farm safety part of everyday work. Michigan farmers may find both agricultural and non-agricultural resources (e.g., construction) useful to identify hazards on the farm. MSU OEM resources come in the following three formats and are organized by industry and hazards.

- [Hazard alerts](#): Topic-specific resources that describe a farm hazard, injury events to Michigan farmers involving that hazard, and practical recommendations for prevention. Examples of topics include:
 - Farm-Related Machinery Entanglements in Michigan ([English/Spanish](#))
 - Safe Animal Handling to Prevent Farm-Related Injuries and Deaths ([English/Spanish](#))
 - Safe Use of Tractors Will Prevent Work-Related Deaths ([English/Spanish](#))
 - Farmers and Trees: Tasks That Can Kill ([PDF](#))
 - Work-Related Deaths from Falls Using Portable Ladders ([English/Spanish](#))
 - Work-Related Deaths from Skid Steer Loaders ([English/Spanish](#))
- [MIOSHA agricultural case summary reports](#): Brief summaries of work-related incidents where Michigan farmers died at work. Each resource summarizes what happened and the hazards that were present and the MIOSHA citation(s) issued. There are 42 different agricultural reports available.
- [MIFACE investigation reports](#): Detailed investigations of individual work-related farm deaths. Each resource describes the sequence of events and contributing factors that lead to the death, including equipment involved and work practices; provides recommendations, and discusses how each recommendation could have prevented the event. There are 67 different agricultural reports available.

MSU OEM has also developed an Agriculture [Respiratory Protection guide](#) to help farmers understand respiratory protection program requirements, applicable regulations and how to select protection for pesticide and non-pesticide inhalation hazards. [MSU OEM's farm safety videos](#) use real incidents to illustrate safe work practices. [MSU Extension Farm Safety page](#) provides additional resources.

Cereal Rye Agronomy Recommendations Differ Across Varieties and Applications

By James DeDecker and Brook Wilke

Fall planted cereal crops are encouraged based on their positive contributions to soil health, subsequent crop yields, and environmental quality through mechanisms such as carbon sequestration and reductions in nutrient loss to water. Aside from winter wheat, cereal rye is the most common winter grain grown by Michigan farmers seeking the benefits noted above due to its well-documented efficacy, availability, winter hardiness and relatively low cost of establishment. Michigan farmers harvested 22,930 acres of rye in 2022 according to the USDA Census of Ag.

Rye is also attracting significant attention from Michigan distillers as a malleable ingredient that can be reliably sourced in-state with yield and quality sufficient for the production of craft spirit products desired by consumers. Michigan craft distilleries contribute more than one billion dollars in total economic impact and collectively use more than 3 million pounds of Michigan grain and fruit in their products each year [2, 3]. However, alcohol sales recently hit a 90 year low in the US due to shifting consumer preferences and federal trade policy has increased market uncertainty, both of which threaten the sustainability of craft beverage businesses. Distilleries have been burgeoned by legislation incentivizing local sourcing of distilling ingredients, which is sustaining demand for all distilling grains. Of particular interest is cereal rye, with rye-based spirits now becoming flagship products/brands for several Michigan distilleries.

Over the last five years, [our research](#) has demonstrated that rye types (open-pollinated vs. hybrid) and varieties differ significantly in grain yield, quality and flavor attributes of interest to Michigan growers and distillers. Our findings have identified rye varieties adapted to Michigan conditions (e.g. AC Hazlet and Danko) and positioned the craft distilling industry for sustainable growth based on local rye spirits. Despite this progress, it is clear that Michigan distilleries will continue to demand a diverse range of rye genetics from growers to meet their various needs related to processing efficiency (spirit yield), product quality (flavor) and marketing. This presents both opportunities and challenges for Michigan farmers who may be compelled to grow a rye variety they are not familiar with, or which may not be adapted to their current production practices. For example, heritage open-pollinated rye varieties may offer a superior flavor profile for distilling, but are also tall and prone to lodging, which can compromise grain yield and quality. Similarly, hybrid rye varieties can yield significantly more grain per acre (and spirit per ton) than open-pollinated types, but may require a lower seeding rate or higher nitrogen rate to maximize their yield and quality potential.

In 2025-26, we compared four seeding and nitrogen rates across six cereal rye varieties at MSU’s Kellogg Biological Station with support from MDARD CBC. Our preliminary results suggest that open pollinated (OP) and hybrid rye varieties respond differently to these treatments. Hybrid varieties (KWS Serafino, Tayo, Receptor) yielded well at lower seeding rates and higher N rates, whereas OPs needed higher seeding rates and lower N rates (in some cases) to maximize yield. The research is being repeated in 2026-27.



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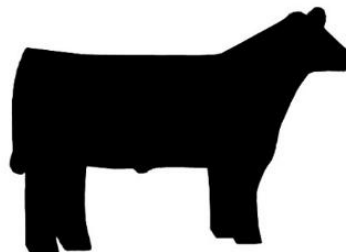
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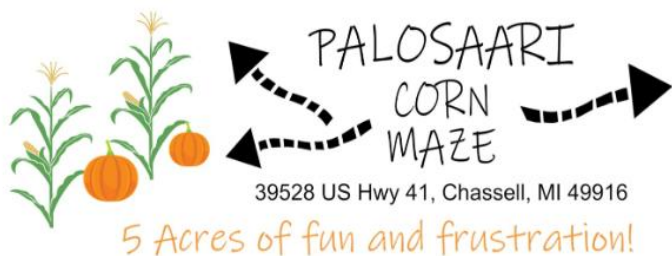
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