



**Thank you for another great programming year! We couldn't do our work for the residents of Branch County without your continued partnership!**  
Julie Pioch, District 13 Director  
[piochj@msu.edu](mailto:piochj@msu.edu)

**659 4-H Youth Enrolled**

**137 Adult Volunteers**

**34 Community Clubs**

**3063 Total Youth Reached**



*Odds N' Ends 4-H Club booth at TSC during 4-H Paper Clover Sales*

**Branch County Based Staff**

Megan Wilczynski 4-H Program Coordinator  
ishie Ritchie, Community Nutrition Instructor  
Angie Gradiz, Irrigation Educator  
Tamra Bildner, Office Manager

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**Branch County 4-H Recognition Night** is a night to celebrate our successes over the past year, we had a special guest, Keynote Speaker Senator Jonathan Lindsey, who is a Branch County 4-H Alumni. He discussed key life lessons learned through 4-H that have carried him through life that he didn't necessarily realize at the time as a youth. He discussed attending a Citizen Washington Focus trip years ago that our current 4-H program coordinator had attended the same year. Senator Lindsey thanked Branch County 4-H for inviting him and reminding him of the 4-H pledge and all the amazing opportunities offered through 4-H. Over 100 Branch County 4-H youth and leaders were in attendance at our 2023 Recognition Night.

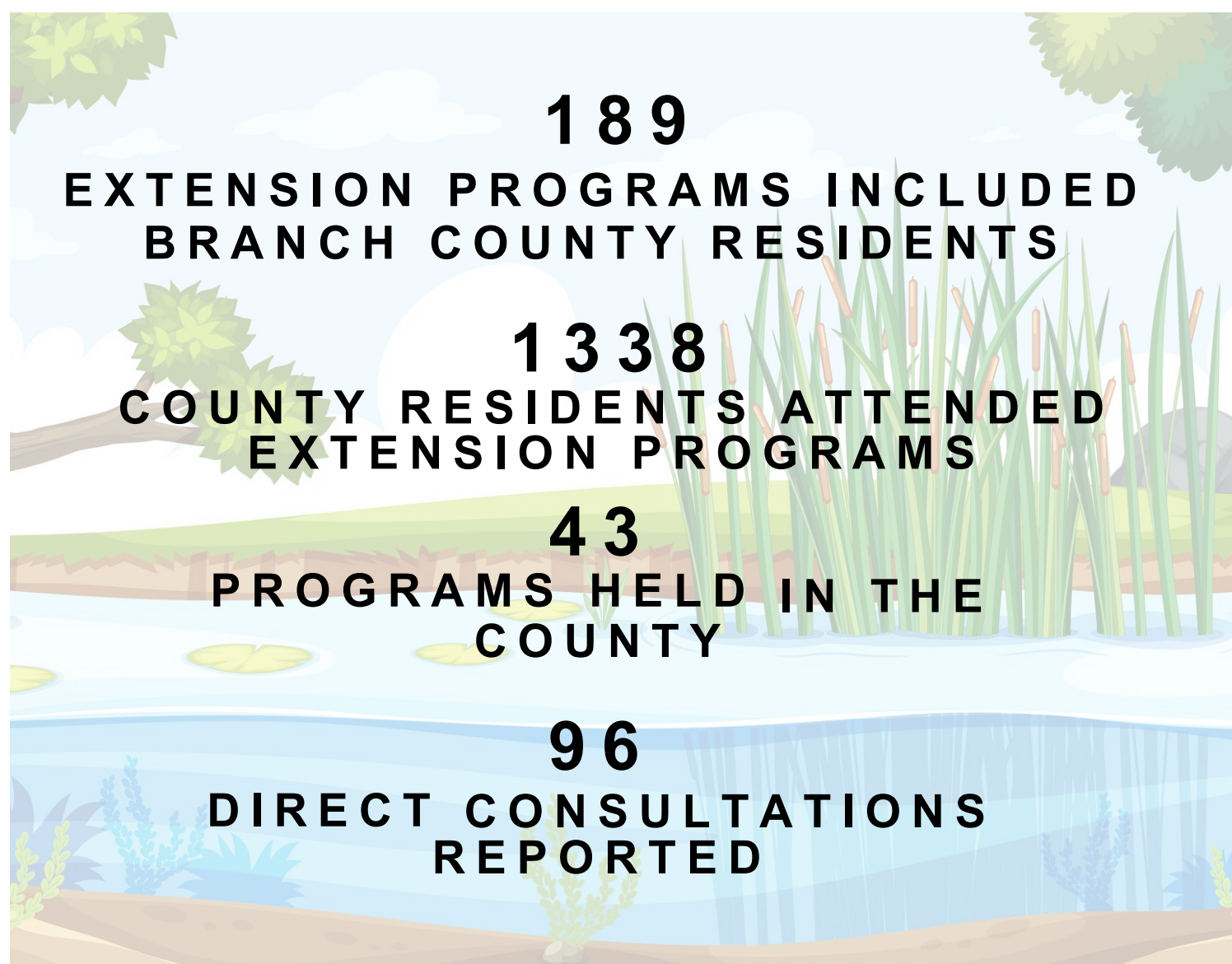
- **Megan Wilczynski Branch 4-H Program Coordinator**

**Branch County  
General Fund Appropriations**

<b>2021</b>	<b>\$115,172</b>
<b>2022</b>	<b>\$134,568</b>
<b>2023</b>	<b>\$146,469</b>

**BRANCH COUNTY  
MSU EXTENSION WEBSITE**

12,510 PAGE VIEWS  
3,050 VISITORS  
20% REGULAR CONSUMERS



12 Residential Soil Tests  
4 Commercial Soil Tests

223 Youth Reached via  
SNAP Education



22 "ASK EXTENSION" Questions



## Health Programming Reaches Nearly 300 in Southwest Michigan

*"It's so easy to feel stuck and tired with chronic illness. You have helped me to improve my life."*

— *Chronic Pain PATH Participant*

Being healthy means tending to our unique physical health needs, however, that takes shape. Whether practicing tai chi in a sunny park or ensuring our immunizations are up to date, we can improve our physical health by managing chronic conditions, preventing injury and illness, and embracing joyful movement to the best of our abilities.

Social-emotional and mental health is also key. We can care for this part of our health in a multitude of ways, from practicing mindfulness to learning how to support someone in a mental health crisis. This allows us to cope with negative situations and feelings, foster strong and healthy relationships with others and ourselves, and live with purpose and meaning.

Good sleep, access to healthy foods, supportive relationships — what it means to be healthy is different to us all. That's why MSU Extension is here to support all the ways we can live healthier lives and build healthier communities, by bringing the vast knowledge and resources of MSU directly to individuals, communities and businesses.

In 2023, nearly 300 residents from Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph and Van Buren Counties participated in health and food safety programming including Stress Less with Mindfulness, Personal Action Toward Health (PATH), RELAX: Alternatives to Anger, Home Food Preservation, Safe Food = Healthy Kids, the Michigan Vaccine Project, A Matter of Balance, and SLeep Education for Everyone (SLEEP) just to name a few. The team at H & C Burnside Center have been excellent partners in helping us reach Seniors with our health programs in 2023.



## 2023 Great Lakes Expo

*"I cannot say enough good things about this conference. The presence of University information and education (understandable for growers) combined with the industry resources is unmatched for the horticulture industry anywhere else." ---GLEXP Participant*

The Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable & Farm Market EXPO, Michigan Greenhouse Growers EXPO (GLEXP) and Lavender Conference is an annual event that draws thousands of farmers from Michigan and beyond to the DeVos Place Convention Center in Grand Rapids each December.

Attendees included fruit growers, vegetable growers, fruit and vegetable growers, and greenhouse growers. In 2023, the multi-day event had nearly 3,200 attendees in more than 90 educational sessions and workshops with sessions on specialty crops, greenhouses and farm marketing.

MSU Extension's team of vegetable, fruit, greenhouse, and community food system educators and specialists organized 77 out of 96 recorded educational activities offered. The 2023 show offered 54 Michigan Restricted Use Pesticide (RUP) credits, 47.5 Ohio RUP credits, and 100.5 Certified Crop Advisor (CCA) continuing education credits.

Organizers also put together two separate bus tours in conjunction with GLEXP. The Farm Market Bus had 152 participants on three buses visiting six farm market and agritourism operations to the east and northeast of Grand Rapids. The Greenhouse Biological Control Essentials: Setting Yourself Up for Success Workshop and Bus Tour visited Walters Gardens in Zeeland.

## ERAIL Trailer Used in Branch County Animal Hauling Accident

On December 14, 2023, a livestock hauler with 120 pigs headed to market, overturned on a two-lane road in western Branch County. The driver was unhurt, but several pigs did not survive the crash. While these types of events don't happen frequently, when an accident involving animals does happen these unexpected events can quickly turn into chaotic and dangerous situations. The Branch County incident is an example of a situation that the MSU Extension Emergency Response to Accidents Involving Livestock (ERAIL) Team has trained and prepared for and worked to address. In 2023, ERAIL training reached 116 participants from Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph and Van Buren Counties.



## MSU Extension Citizen Science Project in Branch County



The Michigan Clean Water Corps (MiCorps) Volunteer Stream Cleanup Program (VSCP) provides small grants to local units of government to help implement trash cleanup of rivers, streams and creeks to improve the waters in Michigan. Local units of government are eligible to get the grants and often partner with nonprofit organizations or other volunteer groups to carry out the cleanups.

Each year, \$25,000 is made available in VSCP grant funding. The Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) appropriation for this program originates from fees collected from the sale of the state's Water Quality Protection license plates (2000 PA 74). Eligible organizations may apply for up to \$5,000 on their project. The grants require a 25 percent local match of the total project cost. Grant funds are disbursed on a cost-cost-reimbursement basis and only disbursed after satisfactory completion of the cleanup project and final reporting requirements.

Ten organizations received grants and completed Citizen Science projects in 2023 including the Branch Conservation District where 60 Branch County VSCP volunteers assisted in the cleanup project. A total of 63 county residents assisted in MiCorps programs last year. MiCorps is a network of lake and stream volunteer monitoring programs in Michigan.

Cooperative Lakes Monitoring Program volunteers monitor the water quality of their lakes to document changes over time. Participants collect data on various parameters including Secchi disk transparency, total phosphorus, chlorophyll a, dissolved oxygen, temperature, shoreline habitat, aquatic plant identification and mapping, and monitor for invasive plants. Staff provide training and support to volunteers.

MiCorps provides technical assistance to local units of government and nonprofit entities for water quality monitoring in wadable streams and rivers through the Volunteer Stream Monitoring Program (VSMP). The resultant data are used by local communities and EGLE to identify waterways requiring more detailed assessment and to inform water resource management.

## Nutrition Education Connects with Teens

After a presentation by Nisha Ritchie, MSU Extension Community Nutrition Instructor at a county-wide professional development day for educators in Branch County, a high school teacher and cheerleading coach asked her to speak to her team about eating healthy. She mentioned that many girls are very frugal with what they eat due to body image issues, and she was concerned that someone will end up getting injured due to poor nutrition.

The program for the cheerleaders was held at the first practice after tryouts. Nisha sat on the mats with the 17 young ladies who made the team. They reviewed MyPlate, nutrients provided by foods and how the body uses the nutrients. The discussed how important it was for each member of the team to eat healthy so that they have the strength to support each other during their routines and stunts. The team set a goal of going to the state competition. Nisha used that goal to reinforce proper nutrition habits to ensure no one gets injured. They also discussed how skipping meals can be detrimental to their performance. At the conclusion of the lesson, the team developed a SNACK BUCKET that the coach would keep in her classroom so each cheerleader could grab something before practice every day. The teens also established "breakfast buddies" to hold each other accountable for not skipping meals.

***"I talked to the parents about the snack bucket. I have a parent that is going to organize food for competition days. I have girls that are taking turns bringing food for the snack bucket each week. The next day I had a mom drop off 6 boxes of cliff bars and then another mom brought in a whole bag of apples. As soon as I got to practice yesterday, I heard everyone talking about the breakfast they ate! THEY LISTENED!! YAHOOO!! Hopefully it continues!" - Coach K. Miller***

At Legg Middle School in Coldwater, Nisha Ritchie, MSU Extension Community Nutrition Instructor provided a Teen Cuisine Nutrition Education series. The classroom teacher had the students write a paragraph reflection based on what they learned. One student said:

***"Those cards that Mrs. Ritchie tested of a GO, SLOW, WHOA helped me realize that I have been eating super bad foods but now I actually try to be healthy! I eat a lot more veggies and fruits and they fill me up, unlike junk food."***





## Branch County 4-H Raises \$9,575 with Pie Auction

In 4-H, leaders look for every opportunity to use a teachable moment to teach youth life skills. Life skills are just that – skills that youth will use for a lifetime such as organizational skills, responsibility, time management, accountability and others. Fundraising for nonprofit organizations can be one of these teachable moments designed to raise funds and at the same time provide other opportunities for the community and for youth and adult volunteers and families.

On March 4, 2023, the Branch County 4-H Leaders Council held its annual benefit spaghetti dinner and pie auction. In its 12th year, 132 meals were sold with an estimated 175 in attendance for the pie auction, which was held after dinner. The event raised \$9,575.00 from the pie auction alone, including a maple pecan pie that sold for \$500.

Generally, 4-H is known for having great bakers and the Branch County council members and other volunteers are no exception. The council consists of youth and adult volunteers who work to further the 4-H program in Branch County. Youth as well as adult volunteers are learning teamwork and the leadership skills it takes to plan a project from start to finish. The funds raised from this popular will help with programming, project supplies, Expo Days, National 4-H Congress, local camps and scholarships.

The benefits of organizing a special fundraiser include leadership opportunities for youth and promotional opportunities for your group. The community is usually supportive of such endeavors with the right promotional information before the event. The newer and older traditional 4-H families come to support and enjoy spending time with other 4-H families as well as their own.



Families not acquainted with 4-H join in the fun to support others and learn about 4-H at the same time. Community businesses will sometimes support the efforts by donating to the overall group as part of the fundraiser.

The Branch County 4-H Leaders Council is looking forward to another wildly successful spaghetti dinner and pie auction in 2024.



## ServSafe Training Supports New Business in Branch County

ServSafe teaches about foodborne illness, how to prevent it and how to train employees about the latest food safety issues. Topics include: providing safe food, forms of contamination, the safe food handler, the flow of food, food safety management systems, safe facilities & pest management, cleaning & sanitizing. Nine people from Branch County were ServSafe certified in 2023 through MSU Extension.

A participant in ServSafe had never worked in the food service industry and was taking the ServSafe class and exam for the first time. He was convinced that he was not going to pass the first time but wanted to take the exam for practice and then attend another class. His goal was to open a food truck with his brothers and was eager to learn food safety information. He took his time during the exam taking the full 2 hours that are allotted before turning the exam in, still not feeling confident that he was going to pass. To pass the exam you need to receive a 70%, he received an 81% on the exam and passed. This participant now has the certification and food safety knowledge to be able to open his own business.

After emailing him his results, he messaged me and said: ***"Woouuuuuu' you made me scream with joy it means a lot. I enjoy your class and I will retake it just to get more enrichment in knowledge. Thank you"***.