



March 11, 2026

Van Buren Conference Center, Lawrence, MI
Hosted by the Van Buren Conservation District

- 8:30 AM **Check-in & Refreshments**
- 9:00 AM **Welcome & District Programs Update**
- 9:25 AM **Why Cover Crops Make Sense: Overcoming Myths About Cover Crop Adoption (John Pike, Pike Ag, LLC)[RUP]**
- 10:15 AM **Break**
- 10:25 AM **Breakout Sessions**
- Grain Track: Advanced Cover Crop Management in Grain Systems (John Pike) [RUP]
 - Livestock Track: Building Back Healthy Soils - Using Cattle and Conservation (Brandi Mitchell of Mitchell Cat Creek Farms)
 - Perennial Track: Getting More Than N-P-K From Your Fertilizer Source (Theo Medendorp, Morgan Composting)
- 11:20 AM **Break**
- 11:30 AM **Breakout Sessions**
- Grain Track: Farmer Panel: The Good, The Bad, and Reality of Integrating Cover Crops (Mark Hacker, Justin Kruithoff, and Andy White)
 - Livestock Track: Protecting People, Livestock, and the Land: ERAIL, Animal Transportation, and Regenerative Agriculture (Katie Ockert, MSUE)
 - Perennial Track: Farmer Panel: Regenerative Ag Practices for Specialty Crops (Steve Lecklider, Maxx Eichberg, and Joe Herman)
- 12:25 PM **Lunch and Learn**

Grain Track: Loring | Livestock Track: Elberta | Perennial Track: Red Haven





VAN BUREN CONSERVATION DISTRICT STAFF CONTACTS

Colleen Forestieri, Senior Conservation Specialist
agconservation@VanBurenCD.org
269-218-0119

Erin Fuller, Water Quality Project Manager
watershed@VanBurenCD.org
269-218-0199

Gabriel Francisco, Conservation Technician
conservation_tech@VanBurenCD.org
269-633-9428

Kyle Mead, Senior Conservation Specialist
MAEAP & RAP Programs
maeap@VanBurenCD.org
269-205-3377

Emilly Hickmott, Executive Director
director@VanBurenCD.org
269-633-9054

Alex Florian, Invasive Species Coordinator
invasivesed@VanBurenCD.org
269-633-9044

Jacob Diljak, Outreach Coordinator
outreach@VanBurenCD.org
269-633-9052

Jena Johnson, Invasive Species Technician
striketeam@vanburencd.org
269-366-7287

Kalli Marshall, Materials Management Project Manager
resourcerecovery@VanBurenCD.org
269-633-9314

Kim Sinclair, Administrator
administrator@VanBurenCD.org
269-633-9042

Lia Will, Administrative Associate
admin_associate@VanBurenCD.org





SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Keynote Address: Why Cover Crops Make Sense: Overcoming Myths About Cover Crop Adoption (John Pike, Pike Ag, LLC)

Session Description: Cover crops are a hot topic that have received a great deal of attention related to many potential benefits to the soil and environment overall. While many of these claims have been confirmed through detailed research, it is not only the use of cover crops, but also the effective management of the cover crop system that is key to success. In this session John will discuss reasons why utilizing cover crops makes sense, while addressing some missteps involved over the history of cover crop promotions that have created some mental and cultural hurdles to cover crop adoption that we have the knowledge and technology to overcome today.

Bio: John Pike is a sixth generation farmer in Marion, IL. He operates Pike Ag, LLC, providing agronomic consulting and contract research services for the ag industry. John works in nitrogen management research and is also involved in many cover crop research projects and educational efforts. John will discuss how cover crop systems are tools that can be utilized, with proper management, to improve soil function and your soil health as a whole, to increase productivity and resilience to seasonal challenges.

SESSION DESCRIPTIONS: GRAIN TRACK

Advanced Cover Crop Management in Grain System (John Pike, Pike Ag, LLC)

Session description: In this session John will focus on effective strategies for the first stages of cover crop adoption, and important aspects of fine-tuning practices in longer term cover crop systems to achieve desired results in a given field or farm. Considerations for choosing cover crop species, complimentary seeding mixes and seeding rate options, termination, weed and pest suppression, as well as nutrient management strategies will be discussed. Bring questions from your operation to guide the conversation.





Grain Farmer Panel: The Good, The Bad, and Reality of Integrating Cover Crops

Session description: We will hear from farmers who have made cover crops work for their farm. Participants will be able to ask questions and participate in the discussion.

Bios:

Mark Hacker: Mark is a 4th generation farmer out of Athens, MI. Mark farms 2,500 acres of no-till corn and beans with his father. He also raises rye and oats for cover crop seed. Mark started dabbling with cover crop mixes after hearing Dave Brant speak in 2015 at our Farming for the Future Conference. He tries to get most of his acres covered after harvest.

Andy White: Andy owns and operates Rolling Meadow Farms, a 6th generation farm in Jones, MI. He and his dad farm 3,200 acres of grain crops along with market hogs. They use a number of conservation practices on their farms, including reduced tillage, manure management, diverse crop rotation, and cover crops. They irrigate about 2/3 of their acreage, so irrigation management is a big driver for them to improve the soil health on their farm.

Justin Kruithoff: Justin is the 3rd generation farming his family's land. Justin's grandpa bought the farm in 1970 and started a farrow to finish hog operation. Justin came back to the farm in 2014 after attending MSU. In addition to their grain crop operation, they currently farrow to finish 34,000 hogs while having a 50 head cattle herd direct-to-market beef operation. They farm 2,800 acres of corn, beans, and wheat using minimal tillage. Justin's dad started incorporating cover crops over 20 years ago to bale for cattle but quickly saw the added benefits within the soil. The next step was to get more cover crops on the farm and they started aerial cover cropping with NRCS. Most recently, they have started cover cropping with their own drones in addition to the use of multispecies mixtures after wheat.





SESSION DESCRIPTIONS: LIVESTOCK TRACK

Building Back Healthy Soils - Using Cattle and Conservation (Brandi Mitchell, Mitchell Cat Creek Farms)

Session description: During this session Brandi Mitchell will share the journey of her family's beef cow-calf operation in Hersey, Michigan. She will discuss how they transitioned to regenerative agriculture to solve farm-level challenges and their discovery of the vital link between raising quality beef and building soil health. Attendees will learn about the power of planned conservation, collaborating with resource professionals, and the practical application of soil-building practices in a real-world grazing operation.

Bio: Brandi Mitchell is the Conservation Technician at Osceola-Lake Conservation District, where she is the boots on the ground for two programs: MAEAP (Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program) and RAP (Regenerative Agriculture Program). Brandi along with her husband are beef producers and run a grazing beef cow-calf operation in Hersey Michigan, where they have come to find a strong focus on the building of soil health while raising beef. They have had a journey that brought them to regenerative agriculture to solve problems on the farm, through networking, connecting with resource professionals, and putting practices to test.

Protecting People, Livestock, and the Land: E-RAIL, Animal Transportation, and Regenerative Agriculture (Katie Ockert, MSUE)

Session description: The Michigan State University (MSU) Extension's Emergency Response to Accidents Involving Livestock (ERAIL) program equips both law enforcement personnel and livestock farmers with the essential resources required to safeguard motorists when livestock related incidents occur on public roadways. Given the increasing transit of livestock for transport to regional markets or for the implementation of rotational grazing practices it is increasingly vital that both first responders and livestock owners possess proficiency in specialized crisis management for these events. During this session you will meet with the local E-RAIL team and hear more about this fantastic support program set up in our state.





Bio: Katie Ockert has served as an MSU Extension Educator since 2005, providing programming and leadership in animal science, biosecurity, livestock and wildlife disease issues, and emergency preparedness. She is a member of the MSU Extension ERAIL team and actively contributes to programming for small and beginning farms. In addition to her Extension work, Katie teaches undergraduate courses in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Michigan State University, sharing her expertise and passion for sustainable agriculture and animal health.

SESSION DESCRIPTIONS: PERENNIAL TRACK

Getting More Than N-P-K From Your Fertilizer Source (Theo Medendorp, Morgan Composting)

Session description: Theo will discuss the benefits of using composted manure in your farming system vs typical commercial fertilizers while still meeting Produce Safety Rules. These benefits go beyond the nutrients needed for a year's worth of production.

Bio: Theo Medendorp is an agronomist with a bachelor's degree from Northern Michigan University. At Morgan Composting his focus is on soil test interpretation and fertility management. He works with farmers on various crops to develop creative solutions for handling, applying and finding value in non-traditional fertilizers and amendments. He is married and has three children.

Perennial Farmer Panel: Regenerative Ag for Specialty Crops (Steve Lecklider of Lehman's Orchards, Maxx Eichberg of Stranger Wine Co., and Joe Herman formerly of Karma Vista Winery)

Session description: Farming differently than your neighbors is very common but when you really stray far from the conventional norms you can be the subject of other people's coffee shop conversations. Why not ask these guys for yourself? These farmers are offering their time to share about their practices, lessons and philosophies. There will be plenty of time for Q & A's at this session.



FARMING FOR THE FUTURE

Bios:

Steve Lecklider of Lehman's Orchards - Steve is the third generation farmer running Lehman's Orchards today. Today's farm looks quite different from the original tart cherry farm. Nowadays, this U-Pick farm has many different fruit varieties offering options for customers all summer long. Steve's practices are forever evolving and soil health focused. The use of cover crops, compost, mowing and IPM make their system complex but Steve will discuss how it works for the overall goals of the farm. <http://www.lehmansorchard.com/growing-practices.html>

Maxx Eichberg of Stranger Wine Co. - Stranger Wine Co. is a family-owned micro-winery in Buchanan, Michigan, rooted in the Lake Michigan Shore AVA. Founded in 2021 by husband-and-wife team Maxx Eichberg, Dip.WSET, MWS2 and Sidney Finan, the winery sprang from their shared passion for wine and agriculture and a desire to "find meaning in an otherwise meaningless world" through winemaking. They purchased the historic 15-acre Avonlea Estate vineyard in 2021 after working a harvest in southwest Michigan changed their original plan to launch a winery in Oregon.. Avonlea is located in Buchanan, MI, and sits within the Lake Michigan Shore AVA. It features 15 acres of mature vinifera vines including Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Riesling. All vineyards are farmed regeneratively with a focus on organic spray regiments as much as possible.. The team avoids all herbicides and synthetic pesticides, instead using biological fungicides, hand labor for all major vineyard tasks, intense cover crop regiments and grazing sheep twice a year (spring / fall) to mow and fertilize. Wild native species plantings and pollinator habitats are maintained between rows and throughout their fields boosting beneficial insect and floral populations. They also farm other Berrien County sites including Old Shore Vineyard (Pinot Noir / Pinot Gris), Shiny Quarter Vineyard (USDA Organic, Cabernet Franc, Tannat, Gruner Veltliner, Albarino, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon) and source from partners like Tom's / Abigail's Vineyard at Domaine Berrien and Outcross Vineyard (Farmed regeneratively by mentor Mike DeSchaaf). All grapes are 100% Michigan-grown in Berrien County. <https://www.strangerwineco.com/viticulture>

Joe Herman - Joe Herman recently retired from farming and has sold his winery (formally Karma Vista, now Filkins Vineyards) and has sold most of his land. At one time there were over 250 acres of tree fruit and vineyards. But Joe left quite a legacy



FARMING FOR THE FUTURE

behind. In 2012 Joe decided to fully give up using herbicides in the vineyard. Instead, using cover crops, compost, and other regenerative practices, the Hermans were on the forefront of promoting and sustaining the incredibly diverse forms of microbial life within the soil. The goal was an attempt to heal the soil, prevent erosion, control weed growth, and reduce synthetic chemicals. Come learn about Joe's incredible journey of cutting inputs on his farm and while gaining life in so many ways!

<https://filkinsvineyards.com/land/>

