

Annual Report 2020



Elberta Beach Clean Up, Sept 2020



Our mission is to
preserve & enhance
the natural resources
of Benzie County

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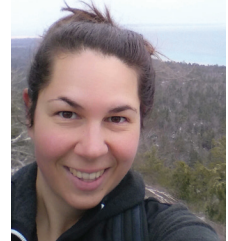
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**A Huge Thank You
to Our Partners,
Supporters &
Volunteers!**



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Following Our Heads, Hearts & Science

Many times in the course of human history, science has been controversial; take for example the old-world concept that the earth was flat! In the early 4th century BC Plato wrote about a spherical earth, and by about 330 BC his former student Aristotle provided evidence for the spherical shape of the Earth on empirical grounds. Still, there was plenty of push-back then, and there are still examples of people who subscribe to the “flat earth model” in spite of overwhelming scientific data that proves we’re living on a sphere!

We seem to be in another period in time when science is being questioned, when the data is dismissed, with conjecture and speculation holding greater sway over data-driven evidence for certain segments of the world’s population. For example, we have an administration in Washington DC that has proclaimed they ...“don’t think science really knows” when discussing the effects of climate change on the frequency and intensity of forest fires out west. On the other side, 95 percent of the world’s scientists, those educated and trained in their field, agree that the condition the earth finds itself in is due in large part to carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels. In another example of “data dismissal,” documented evidence shows that masking up will help slow the spread of the pandemic, yet many folks have forsaken their health and that of others because they don’t

trust or believe the science which very clearly supports the practice.

We at the BCD believe whole-heartedly in science. In fact, we are fortunate enough to employ two of the best young scientists in the region, both of whom have master’s level degrees in the environmental sciences. And while the use of conjecture and speculation can be an important part of their development of a theory, those “hunches” play second fiddle to hard data. We, as a community, need science to tell us how much nitrogen and phosphorous is present in the water, whether or not E.coli is impeding the swimming area, and how the kinds of macroinvertebrates in the stream tell us the health of the waterways. Science helps us know what we need to do to protect our natural environment and ourselves, to keep our corner of the world vital and our citizens informed, engaged and safe. Still, if you’re skeptical of some science, or have questions about the validity of certain data, that can be healthy and we welcome anyone to come in for an invigorating, socially distanced discussion! But remember, no amount of speculation or conjecture, without the proven data, can replace the science that helps keep us strong.

All the Best,

Tad Peacock, Executive Director

VIRTUAL ANNUAL MEETING

Tues, November 12, 2020 @ 4 pm

~ Check our website: www.benziecd.org to join ~



Last year we had a wonderful annual meeting gathering at the Mills House and learned about the fishers and martens from wildlife biologist Linda Thomasma. Unfortunately, this year all indoor programming hit the pandemic wall and we deeply regret not being able to meet and greet with our community. Thank you for your support and here’s to the wellness and safety for all: Cheers; we hope to see you next year!

Invasive Species Network *by Katie Grzesiak*

COVID19 Note: 2020 has been a unique and challenging year for many of us. For the Northwest Michigan Invasive Species Network (ISN), it has driven home how incredibly lucky we are to have a supportive, cooperative group of partners. When roughly 75% of ISN's budget was paused due to restrictions in the Michigan Discretionary Fund, so many partners advocated for and supported ISN in an unexpected number of ways, allowing us to exist on a basic level despite laying off more than half our staff. With funding now reinstated, we continue to be humbled by the outpouring of support during a time when everyone, not just ISN, was and is struggling. Thank you!



Garlic mustard pull in Benzie County.

Our projects for the fiscal year (October 2019-September 2020) have been successfully completed or extended due to extenuating circumstances, with work in Benzie, Grand Traverse, Leelanau, and Manistee counties.

Surveys for hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA) continued in January through March, accessing over 110 sites and 1,200 acres, with no detections. Thanks to a grant extension, we plan to continue surveys in the 2021 winter season. Garlic mustard season was deeply impacted by COVID-19 restrictions on ISN's end, but sponsored dumpsters in each of our four counties enjoyed all-time popularity, including reporting from steadfast volunteers—over 120 bags were reported. Top-priority species were treated by our skeleton staff, including invasive knotweeds, black swallow-wort, Chinese yam, Phragmites, Oriental bittersweet, butterbur, and giant hogweed. In all, over 500 acres and 300 sites were managed.

ISN updated our prioritization framework as well, resulting in groups of Top 12, Awareness, Early Detection, and additional species. This new category system is aimed to help the public hone in on what species to be looking for in a particular habitat.

Presentations, meetings, and workshops moved online, and new resources were created with minimal contact in mind. In all, we contacted over 3,000 people one-on-one by phone, email, or socially-distanced in-person work, and over half a million people were reached through social and traditional media efforts. In addition, over 1,000 people contacted ISN for help for the first time!

Our groundbreaking Go Beyond Beauty program was also funded for expansion not only within our own service area, but state-wide! This included bringing on a new staff member, Shelly Stusick, to specialize in the program. Stay tuned for progress on this project in the coming three years.

If you have questions, want to get involved, or wish to schedule a presentation to an interested group, visit www.HabitatMatters.org or contact Katie Grzesiak at kgrzesiak@gtcd.org or (231) 941-0960 x 29.

ISN's work is funded in part through grants from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (administered by the US Forest Service and the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians), the Michigan Invasive Species Grant Program (www.Michigan.gov/invasives), and the Good Neighbor Authority (a partnership of the US Forest Service and Michigan DNR), as well as cost-share from landowners and generous donations from supporters.

ISN in 2019/2020:

- Surveyed over 1,500 acres of high-quality habitats for invasive species at over 250 sites
- Restored over 30 acres with native plants
- Treated over 500 acres of high-priority invasive species at over 300 sites (a similar number of sites to 2019!)
- Coordinated 5 garlic mustard dumpsters, 5 trainings, and 17 presentations
 - Engaged over 60 volunteers for over 100 volunteer hours (similar to 2019!)
- Contacted over 3,400 people in-person and over 500,000 using traditional & social media
 - Over 1,300 people contacted ISN for the first time with questions (WAY up from 2019!)
- Added 8 Go Beyond Beauty participants
- Responded to Early Detection reports:
 - Hogweed population possibly eradicated in Manistee
 - Dozens of responses to mistaken reports handled over the phone/email

Aquatic Invasive Species *by Jane Perrino*

As with many things in 2020, the Benzie Conservation District's "Aquatic Invasive Species Pathways Program" (AISPP) season looked different. The program was awarded a three-year grant through the Michigan Invasive Species Grant Program to provide aquatic invasive species (AIS) services to four counties; an expansion of technical assistance and service area we've looked forward to since the AISPP's inception. Unfortunately, State budget freezes due to COVID-19 led to award suspension for the field season. Support from Benzie townships (Almira, Benzonia, Blaine, Crystal Lake, Homestead, and Lake) and Huron-Manistee National Forest sustained some AISPP activities in the summer months.

Through partnership with the Huron-Manistee National Forest, we continued a lake monitoring and vegetation survey project, working on five lakes this season: Sanford, Garey, Brooks, Bronson, and Stevens lakes. All five lakes received periodic water quality monitoring as well as chlorophyll a and phosphorus analysis to support a full vegetation survey. Shoreline habitat surveys were completed as well. Reports will be posted on the Benzie Conservation District website and shared with stakeholders and township governments in order to contribute to science-based management of these waters. We are hopeful that we can engage more with citizen scientists next year on this project as we collect data on five new lakes in Benzie County.

The AISPP continued to provide plant identification technical support to lake associations and riparians. It was a pleasure to assist the Platte Lake Improvement Association in sampling for invasive plant Eurasian watermilfoil this season, following their contracted aerial imaging by drone which had detected several weed beds. This "ground-truthing" will be an important factor in the group's determination of handling this particular invasive species. Our staff also assisted the Crystal Lake & Watershed Association in an update of all AIS signage at the multitude of public launch sites.

This year our team turned to technology to help reach the public with information. We enjoyed collaborating on short educational videos, designed children's AIS activity sheets, and supplemented lake surveys with our own aerial drone imagery. The AISPP continues to explore new methods of spreading awareness on AIS issues. Given record boat sales in Michigan this year, we are looking ahead to a busy boat washing season in 2021, making necessary adjustments to provide meaningful outreach.

Necessity truly is the "mother of invention." Though this

year has certainly not gone as expected, we're grateful for the opportunity to learn, adapt and offer the public new modes of education and service.

For more about this program, booking our boat wash team, and AIS inquiries, please contact AIS Coordinator, Jane Perrino: jane@benziecd.org, or (231) 882-4391.



AIS Educator, Jodi Monteith, monitors dissolved oxygen and temperature to collect data for our survey project.



Becoming familiar with the underwater biodiversity (native water shields) of a lake is critical to its proper stewardship.



Jane Perrino, AIS Coordinator, flies "Bumby" the BCD drone over Sanford Lake.

Forestry Update *by Kama Ross*

Benzie County forest landowners have requested record numbers of site visits from me this year! I believe that with many people spending more time at home because of the coronavirus, and a good number of seasonal residents spending more time at their vacation properties, more landowners are connecting with what is out their backdoor. That is a very good thing!

A lot of the requests for technical assistance have been about insects, diseases and environmental stressors challenging our trees and forests. Beech Bark Disease is probably the number one concern that is out there...and it should be! BBD is causing widespread failure of our beech trees and they can create extremely dangerous situations. Anyone with a mature beech near their property or where they often recreate, should have the tree(s) assessed by a Certified Arborist for hazard potential. Treatment for yard trees are proving to be quite effective to help retain those majestic trees and at an affordable price. To learn more visit www.michigan.gov/invasives/ and type in "Beech Bark Disease" in the search bar.

Areas of Benzie County are also experiencing a lot of loss from oak wilt this year. The most affected areas are around Lake Ann and Herring Lake. New sites are being treated this fall and I am providing a lot of technical assistance to help them control the spread and prevent new sites from developing by not pruning or injuring oak trees during the growing season (April through October). So now is the time for landowners to prune or work around oak trees without the threat of providing a way for oak wilt to start. Visit www.michiganoakwilt.org for identification, control and treatment practices for Oak wilt.

Hemlock Woolly Adelgid is close by...just south of us in Oceana County. Fortunately, the Invasive Species Network will be offering free monitoring to landowners with hemlock trees to find the non-native insect quickly and respond appropriately. Look for information soon about how to have a monitoring team out to your property, free of charge.

Landowners are also looking to their woodlots for additional ways to support their farm operations or family financial situations especially with the pandemic lingering. Demand for wood products is good and we have fine foresters and logging professionals in our area that can carry out sustainable harvest practices. The property tax

savings from the Qualified Forest Program (QFP) is also something that can help families become more active stewards of their property and save on their property taxes. QFP helps owners of 20 acres or more, who don't claim their forested property as their principal residence, to keep the forest property in production and receive annual savings on their property taxes. Having a site visit with me first can help you navigate forest management with success.

BCD will be once again offering a climate change mitigation adaptation strategy to area landowners



A full house for the Planting Workshop at Lake Ann Township Hall just before the COVID restrictions were issued.

through the Assisted Tree Range Expansion Project (ATREP). Six species from Southern Michigan: Shagbark Hickory, Tulip Tree, Sassafras, Hackberry, Black Tupelo and Swamp White Oak. These species will help us enhance biodiversity and habitat for our native wildlife species. Look for a special ordering opportunity next month or during our annual spring seedling sale.

Forest landowners are invited to request a site visit for technical assistance from Kama Ross, our District Forester, at no charge because of grant funding through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Let's set up a visit this coming year!

Contact Kama Ross at 231-256-9783; or email: kama.ross@macd.org.



Fiscal Year Finances 2019 - 2020

REVENUE

Contributions/Donations	\$12,476.00
Tax Revenue	\$164,053.00
Grant Income	\$9,911.00
Tree Sales	\$23,957.00
Sales & Services	\$15,842.00
Other Revenue	\$4,770.00

TOTAL REVENUE \$ 231,009.00

EXPENSES

General Operations	\$ 220,220.00
Cost of Goods	\$13,328.00
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$ 233,548.00
Personnel	\$161,491.00
Other G.O. costs	\$58,729.00

NET ORDINARY INCOME (\$2,539.00)

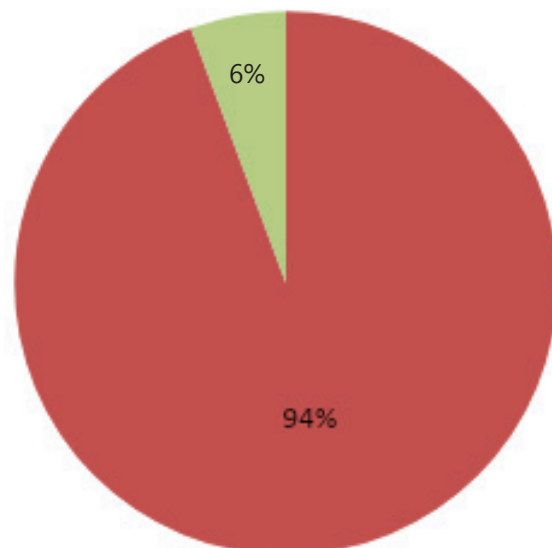
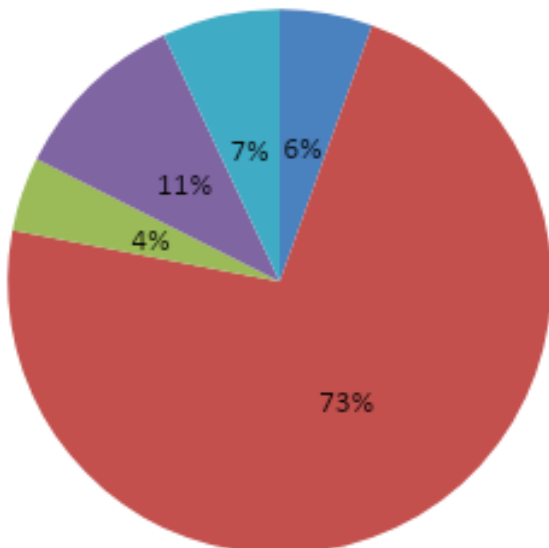
**Data above is for period October 1, 2019 to September 30, 2020 and is unaudited.*

REVENUE PERCENTAGES

Grants	4%
Donations	6%
Tree sales	11%
Other revenue/sales & services	7%
Tax revenue	73%

EXPENSE PERCENTAGES

General operations	94%
Cost of goods	6%



All the programs, workshops, and services, including walk-ins and phone calls, provided by the BCD this year directly engaged approximately 7,000+ local and visiting people!

Waterways by John Ransom

2020 has been an unprecedented year for everyone and Benzie County was not immune. With everything happening in the world, the value and importance of our natural resources has never been greater! The number of lake and river users was up across the county as people looked for ways to recreate responsibly and reconnect with nature. We hope that the increased desire to get outdoors also comes with an awareness that we need to preserve and protect our most valuable resources.

With all the changes in 2020 some things remained the same at the Benzie Conservation District. We have continued monitoring water quality in each of our major watersheds collecting valuable data that lets us track long- and short-term changes and look for the first signs of trouble in each watershed. Our outstanding partners in these watersheds continue to be the bedrock of water quality conservation in the county. Lake associations like the Platte Lake Improvement Association, Crystal Lake and Watershed Association, Upper and Lower Herring Lakes associations, Ann Lake Property Owners Association, Long Lake Association, among others, dedicate 100 hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars toward water quality projects each year. We have provided over 220 hours of technical services and collected over 2,600 points of data for these organizations this last year.

Although we were unable to host our popular volunteer events and water tours this year, we were able add a drone to our conservation tools. Thanks to a grant award from the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians 2% Grant Fund, the BCD was able to acquire a drone.

With the help of our summer technician, Wesley Bond, we were able to get our drone program off the ground (literally!) in 2020. We completed an aquatic plant survey of Upper Herring Lake, surveyed erosion along the Lake Michigan shoreline, and captured numerous photos and videos for our new educational video series "District Shorts." We hope to expand our services with the drone in the coming years!

For more information on our work with Benzie waterways, or other services, please contact John Ransom, Conservation Specialist, at 231.882.4391 x 13; john@benziecd.org.



Wes Bond flies the drone over an orchard and pollinator field. Below: The Volunteer Stream Monitoring Program continued, but with less volunteers and masks!



The opening sequence in our new video series "District Shorts."

Education & Outreach *by Aimé Merizon*

As the Benzie Conservation District starts a new year, our staff gathers for brainstorming sessions to review outreach events to update, re-structure, and add new projects. In 2020, we started our season with two new events that were tied to the county-wide Water Festival: the Frozen Water Tour and Fish-n-Print. Soon afterwards, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S., and our programming was stalled indefinitely.

We were happy to receive the go-ahead from MDARD (Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development) to continue to offer our annual Spring Seedling Sale with very concise safety precautions, and we offered home delivery as well. Incredibly, this event was a big hit; the overall total of sales was larger than we had received in decades! Obviously folks were very focused on their outdoors landscapes during the stay-at-home period and we were thrilled to help them with seedling and other products.

After the spring sale we had to again reconfigure what we would offer our community without hosting our regular events. This shutdown turned out to have a silver lining as we were able to focus on projects that were still in the “cloud” phase and could now come into fruition. The main offering is our video series, District Shorts, that can be found on our website under Programs & Services. The other program we’ve dusted off from years ago and revamped to be a virtual event is our environmental book group: District Readers!

When regulations loosened up a bit for outdoor events, we realized there were a lot of visiting people and locals who were itching for opportunities to get outside and enjoy our beautiful natural resources. This instigated our Fall Mushroom Hikes—another smash hit with such record numbers of people signing up that we extended it to four sessions!

Our annual beach clean up on Elberta Beach, was also held in late September with the weather cooperating for a perfect event celebrated on International Coastal Clean Up Day. We also had record numbers for our annual Fall Seedling Sale, causing the Benzie Conservation District to reflect on how very grateful we are for our community and visitors alike who’ve managed to keep us afloat, while also helping to expand our mission to preserve and enhance our natural resources! We humbly thank everyone who participated in our annual sale and other events, and those who continue to support our work.

For more information, please contact Aimé Merizon at 231.882.4391 x 11; aime@benziecd.org.

- WEBSITE PAGE VISITS: 9,099
- WEBSITE PAGE VIEWS: 24,174
- PHONE CALLS: 557
- WALK-INS: 274
- Eblast opens: 8,837
- FACEBOOK PEOPLE REACHED: 24,012
- NEWSPAPER CIRCULATION: 50,000 plus!



Top: The Frankfort High School Interact Club students pitched in to haul large pieces of decking and stairs off Elberta Beach for our annual clean up. Right: Paul Salvatore, fungi expert, led two mushroom hikes.



Left: We learned about native fish and Gyotaku art printing at the Fish-n-Print workshop. Below: The Frozen Water Tour on Crystal Lake ended up at Five Shores Brewing to learn about, and test, the importance of water in beer production!



MAEAP News *by Parker Ameel*

2020 has been a busy year for MAEAP (Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program). Despite the constraints of Covid-19, the MAEAP program was still able to provide important, technical support to our growers of Benzie and Leelanau counties. In the past year, the Benzie-Leelanau MAEAP Grant was one of the top performing grants in the state.

In 2019-2020, MAEAP has been busy taking part in training, workshops, and conferences throughout the state as well as putting on informational events and collaborating with other natural resource and agriculture professionals in the region. We conducted eight “phase-1” educational sessions through-out the year. Some of the more notable speaking engagements were held at the Northwest Michigan Orchard & Vineyard Show, Northern Michigan Small Farms Conference, and the Freshwater Summit.

After Covid-19 hit, MAEAP was able to pivot and offer technical support for the agricultural community through its efforts with the Food and Farming Network which created a database of resources and mutual aid available to farmers. Additionally, MAEAP helped orchestrate an effort called the “Vitality Growers” which connected people in the community with resources and education to help them start or expand their growing capacity, hoping to grow more food to donate to their local pantries. Additionally, we have been able to share agricultural stories through the Agriculture Forum in the *Record Eagle* newspaper on topics ranging from equity in the food system to creating resilient communities.

In September, the MAEAP technicians organized a Tractor Tire Recycling Day that was open to producers in our four counties to bring in used and unwanted tires to be recycled at no cost to them. In the coming year we are looking forward to continuing our technical support for agricultural producers in MAEAP as well as expanding our outreach to community members on agriculture related issues.

To learn more about MAEAP, contact Parker Ameel, pameel@gtcd.org; 231-941-0960 x 23.



The Tractor & Large Equipment Tire Recycling Day was a down & dirty great success!

Natural Resource Conservation Service

Since 1935 the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been “helping people help the land.” Supporting America’s working lands NRCS has a proud history of supporting America’s farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners. For more than 80 years, we have helped people make investments in their operations and local communities, boost rural economies, increase the competitiveness of American agriculture, and improve the quality of our air, water, soil, and habitat.

As the USDA’s primary, private lands conservation agency we use objective, reliable science to assist our partners, and communities to make decisions about their natural resources. Through one-on-one personalized

advice, we work voluntarily with producers, landowners and communities to find the best solutions to meet their unique conservation and business goals. By doing so, we help ensure the health of our natural resources and the long-term viability of American agriculture.

This year the NRCS worked with Benzie County farmers and landowners to solve conservation resource concerns on their land. Following is a list of different conservation practices that NRCS helped to implement in Benzie County during 2020.

NRCS assisted with 25 applications for Farm Bill Conservation Programs, 4 of those for Benzie County. Total dollar value of those funded applications is \$384,316.00

Produce Safety Program *by Michelle Jacokes*

The Michigan On-Farm Produce Safety Program for Northwest Michigan provides assistance to fresh produce growers to be compliant with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule or those who are working to optimize produce safety practices and procedures on their farm.

In 2020, over 291 growers in Northwest Lower Michigan were provided with produce safety information and updates. Due to the safety precautions of the COVID-19



pandemic, farm site visits were limited. Communications with growers in the 5-county region were done primarily via phone, e-mail and digital or print communication. Technical assistance was provided to 6+ Benzie County growers, who directly reached out for assistance. There are 36 fresh produce growers in

Benzie County who otherwise received information and education in newsletters, trainings, online educational webinars, and more.

Some educational highlights and outreach included; Small Farm Produce Safety in the Age of COVID-19; COVID-19 for U-Pick Farms and Farm Markets; Food and Farming Network Coffee and Conversations; Antrim Danu Hof Field Day Educational Video on Co-Management of Produce Safety, and Domesticated Animals and Wildlife; MSU E Agrifood Safety Produce Bites Podcast

the Michigan On-Farm Produce Safety Team; Health & Hygiene Training for School Gardens; Quarterly Produce Safety Grower Updates and COVID-19 Update; Michigan On-Farm Produce Safety Infographic; Record Eagle Agriculture Forum Articles; Taste the Local Difference Produce Safety Technicians: All About Technicians; Consumers Education Handout on Produce Safety; and educational materials for farm needs regarding produce safety.

Common areas that were addressed in assistance included: Water Testing; Training Protocol; Development of a Food Safety Plan; Worker Hygiene Practices; Toilets and Handwashing; Manure and Compost Use; Record-keeping; Wildlife and Domesticated Animals; Accessing Community Resources; Partnership Contact Sharing. The Michigan On-Farm Produce Safety (MOPS) team also constructed a video detailing what the MOPS team does.

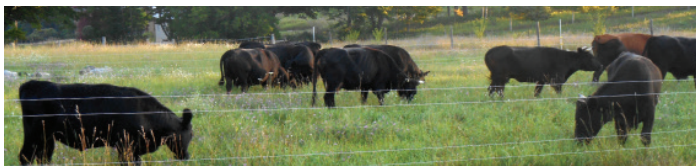
In addition, I partnered with local food and farming organizations to share resources, and information with agriculture providers and producers. I serve on the Food & Farming Network Communications Engagement Committee and Leadership Committee; as well as staying active in the Migrant Resource Council for Northwest Michigan to ensure that resources are shared and supported by the council, and migrant workers in the area.

To stay up-to-date with Produce Safety in the area visit www.manisteeed2.org/produce-safety, or contact Michelle Jacokes, Produce Safety Technician at michelle.jacokes@macd.org; 231.889.9666.

by Scott Hughey

with Benzie's share being \$12,988.00 for 2020. These dollars will be used by landowners to offset the cost of implementing conservation practices in Benzie County, and by providing them with NRCS technical staff and expertise. The 4 successful applications that became contracts are first time customers/farmers with NRCS.

To learn more please check out www.nrcs.usda.gov or contact Scott Hughey at the NRCS field office in Bear Lake: 231.889-9666; scott.hughey@mi.usda.gov.



Highlights of practices and/or amounts installed/implemented in 2020 for Benzie County:

- Cover Crops – 62 Acres
- Nutrient Management – 231 Acres
- Integrated Pest Management – 231 Acres
- Prescribed Grazing – 90 Acres

A Year In Review...

