


BENZIE

CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Annual Report 2022–2023



“Our mission is to preserve and enhance the natural resources of Benzie County.”

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Your conservation partners:



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Remington Rice,
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Kyla Robinson
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Invasive Species
Coordinator



Jodi Monteith,
Conservation
Technician



Ellie Johnson,
District Forester



Adam Brown,
MAEAP
Technician



Breanna
Hannula,
Produce Safety
Technician



Scott Hughey,
NRCS District
Conservationist



Kim Kirkpatrick,
NRCS Natural
Resources
Specialist



Shelly Stusick,
Go Beyond
Beauty
Specialist



Audrey Menninga,
Invasive Species
Network
Coordinator



Ned Milne,
Summer Intern



Zak Gipps,
AmeriCorps
VISTA Member



Jen Burfield,
AmeriCorps
VISTA Member



Terry McMillan,
Aquatic Invasive
Species Tech



Mike Schwartz,
Aquatic Invasive
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Strategic Direction

*for preserving & enhancing
Benzie County's natural resources:*

This year marked the start of our new long-term strategic plan. Over the course of several weeks, we analyzed community feedback from the 2022 Natural Resources Assessment and evaluated opportunities to expand, strengthen, and optimize our work. The result is a strategic vision and key focus areas that will drive our conservation efforts in Benzie County for the next five years.

Our vision is a future where residents and visitors of Benzie County are empowered and actively engaged in conserving our natural resources. We recognize and respect the importance of tradition and cultural heritage and strive to find a balance where environmental sustainability enhances our way of life. Individuals are inspired and well-informed to make choices that reflect deep care for the environment. Natural resource education is seamlessly accessible, driven by collaborative outreach and a robust network of conservation resources and partners. Our collective actions ensure a thriving and resilient home for generations to come.

water

All water, seen and unseen, is recognized as a vital part of life in Benzie County. The Benzie Conservation District is a leader and facilitator, empowering residents and visitors to be active stewards of our water resources.



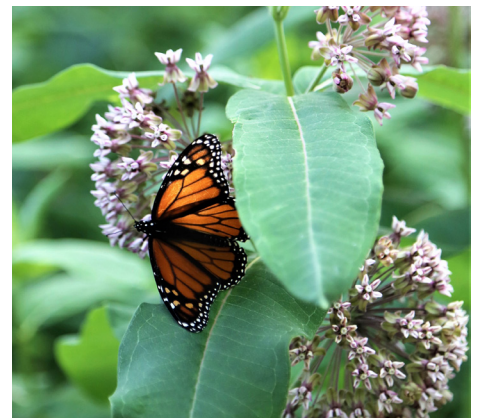
education

The Benzie Conservation District is a trusted resource for accessible, impactful education that empowers our community to protect natural resources for a better tomorrow.



land

The health of Benzie's terrestrial ecosystems and agricultural land is celebrated and protected by all stakeholders. People understand the complex connections between our land, water, and air and proactively steward these resources.



Water

To expand our aquatic impact in 2023, we strengthened connections with partners, supported environmental education, and will continue to empower and facilitate conservation for our partners and community.

Photo credit: Jane Perrino.

Aquatic Impacts: Learning & Monitoring

by Jodi Monteith

2023 marks my seventh year at the Benzie Conservation District, and it was full of personal growth and collaboration. I have made new connections with many natural resource professionals, volunteers, and educators who are all motivated to become better stewards and educators for our region.

So far this year, I have connected with over 200 young minds at six education events. These were put on in association with several local organizations, such as the annual "Leave No Trace" field trip with Benzie County

Schools, Riverside Canoes, and the National Park Service; the "Walkabout" with the Crystal Lake & Watershed Association; and the Congregational Summer Assembly's "Ecology Fun" program.

This summer, I attended two educational professional development workshops at Inland Seas Education Association (ISEA) and Grass River Natural Area. These inspiring sessions led the Benzie Conservation District to host two professional development events of our own. The first was an aquatic plant identifying workshop with Dr. Jo Latimore from MSU Extension. The second event was Michigan Environmental Education Curriculum Support (MEECS) for area educators, held at the new Homestead Hills Elementary School and hosted in partnership with ISEA and Benzie Central Schools.

This summer also marked our fifth year of water quality monitoring with the Huron-Manistee National Forest Partnership Agreement. Using

the techniques of the Cooperative Lakes Monitoring Program, we have sampled on many of our county's underserved lakes and supported established lake associations in data collection. This year, we monitored Lime and Ransom Lakes, which are two of Almira Township's more natural and scenic lakes and had previously been underserved. So far over the five years, we have monitored 22 inland lakes in Benzie County and continue to assist area lake associations with ongoing monitoring. Our goal is to equip more stakeholders with training and tools to watch and care for our county's incredible water resources.

Next year, I am eager to continue to create an inventory of baseline data for every Benzie lake, and to expand and deepen the network of professionals and public interested in caring for Benzie's lakes.

I am truly grateful to be able to work with many amazing people and to serve Benzie County.



Pictured left: water lilies on Otter Lake. Photo credit: Jane Perrino.

Water Quality Monitoring Expands with Lake Biologist Position

by John Ransom

Benzie County is famous for our abundant water resources. Among the crowning jewels in our county is the 10,000 acres of sparkling clear water that stretches from Beulah to Point Betsie: Crystal Lake.

This year, the Crystal Lake & Watershed Association (CLWA) partnered with us to make the Benzie Conservation District's Conservation Specialist, John Ransom, the new Lake Biologist for Crystal Lake. This position was created to better protect Crystal Lake against uncertainty and a growing list of threats, such as runoff and salt concentrations. In addition, the Lake Biologist serves as the go-to person for members of the CLWA and the public to contact with questions or concerns about Crystal Lake.

The first year of this position has focused on two objectives: developing a robust water quality database, and supporting the monitoring program with routine data collection. These goals will help the CLWA and the Benzie Conservation District to better understand the status of the lake and to track changes over time.

In support of these goals, John led a team of summer interns (pictured right) to complete an algae survey on Crystal Lake's shoreline and to collect monthly nutrient samples throughout the Crystal Lake watershed. The information gathered during this most recent field season will appear in the database along with historic data, which can be collectively analyzed to make informed decisions about Crystal Lake's water quality needs and priorities. This winter, John will finalize the database with Dr. Ray Canale, who developed a similar database for the Platte River watershed.

From over 50 inland lakes to hundreds of miles of rivers and streams, Benzie County's surface waters are an important part of life in Northwest Michigan. Riparians and CLWA members can contact John for a site visit to discuss conservation practices on their property or to help identify a potential issue on the lake. ***In addition, residents and visitors are encouraged to contact the Benzie Conservation District with any type of conservation question.*** By starting these conversations, we can work together to preserve and enhance the health of Benzie County's treasured ecosystems.



Pictured above (left to right): Zak Gipps, Jen Burfield, and Ned Milne on a Crystal Lake shoreline survey.

Pictured below (left to right): Ned Milne and Zak Gipps surveying Crystal Lake.



Quotes from the Field

This past summer field season, Benzie County's aquatic environments had more hands-on support than ever before. Five passionate stewards made up our seasonal crew: Zak Gipps, Terry McMillan, Ned Milne, Mike Schwartz, and Jen Burfield. They were instrumental in supporting water quality monitoring and protection in our region. Each member joined us at a different point in their journeys as conservationists, and when asked about their experiences in the field with us, they said:



Pictured: Mike Schwartz holding a sample from a rake toss survey at Portage Lake.

"Before I started my summer, I only knew about the Benzie Conservation District from the seedling sales. I purchased and planted hundreds of bare root trees over the last 7 years at my home in Benzie County. I realized that I had very little idea what the Benzie Conservation District is and has to offer the community. Luckily I was on the newsletter email list and that's how I saw openings for the summer. I love the natural resources in our area and thought, 'what a great way to see what goes on at the Conservation District. And is there an opportunity for me to work in this field?' Even with having no prior experience in the conservation field of work, I was kept busy and feeling useful every day there. I learned that there is a lot of work being done by a small staff of great people. The team at the Benzie Conservation District is very welcoming and passionate about all they do."

— Zak Gipps, AmeriCorps VISTA Member



Pictured, clockwise from top left: Terry McMillan, Mike Schwartz, Zak Gipps, and Jodi Monteith at Lake Ann's boat launch.

"[During my time with the Benzie Conservation District] I learned how to engage with the public about scientific topics; the staff are great at interpreting scientific findings, reporting them to the public, and thoroughly answering any questions. I also learned about freshwater aquatic plants and have a new love and appreciation for a plant like the common bladderwort."

— Jen Burfield, AmeriCorps VISTA Member



Pictured, left to right: Jen Burfield and Kyla Robinson at Crystal Lake for Landing Blitz Week.

"Although it is too difficult to narrow highlights down much, I would have to say that the experience of researching, surveying, and conducting outreach events at so many of the lakes throughout the region is what made this year so special. I grew up swimming, snorkeling, or simply observing the lakes throughout northwest Michigan, so having the opportunity to learn so much about what makes them unique, along with the issues they face has been the most interesting part of my experience at the Benzie Conservation District."

— Mike Schwartz, Aquatic Invasive Species Technician

Land

Through a variety of State & Federal programs, our auxiliary staff protected land resources against growing threats and helped our community members achieve eco-friendly land management goals.



Photo credit: Jane Perrino.

Hemlock Woolly Adelgid Treatments

by Audrey Menninga

2023 saw a huge undertaking for the Northwest Michigan Invasive Species Network (ISN) that wasn't on the books at the start of the year: hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA). This microscopic invasive insect finds itself a place at the base of a hemlock needle, where it can insert a sucker mouthpiece and steal nutrients from the tree. A prolific spreader, HWA can kill trees in about 5–10 years, which gives time for treatments!

HWA was discovered at Crystal Downs Country Club by ISN's Habitat Management Specialist

and HWA Survey Technician towards the end of January. From there, response times went into overdrive. Partners from Mason-Lake Conservation District journeyed north, where they helped ISN conduct detailed surveys and treatments throughout the year to try and contain this infestation.

By the end of September 2023, Mason-Lake and ISN had treated over 7,000 hemlocks in the immediate infestation area. Unfortunately, since that first detection, three more detections

have been discovered in the Frankfort area. It's suspected that a large vehicle may have brought the original infestation into Crystal Downs by brushing against a hemlock overhanging the road, after brushing against an infested hemlock elsewhere. ISN is asking that landowners, especially in the Frankfort area, keep an eye out for HWA. If you suspect you've seen HWA, please contact ISN's Invasive Species Specialist, Zach Seguin at zseguin@habitatmatters.org.



This year, ISN treated 57,166 inches for hemlock woolly adelgid. The “inches treated” metric refers to the diameter at breast height of each tree that is treated.

Pictured left: the Crystal Downs HWA treatment crew, including members from the Invasive Species Network, Mason-Lake Conservation District, and West Michigan CISMA. Photo credit: Audrey Menninga.



Pictured left: cattle at the Lindgren Family farm.

Regenerative Farming in Benzie County

by Adam Brown

The Lindgren Family farm holds a prominent and well-established reputation in Benzie County and for several compelling reasons. Not only are they some of the most passionate people you could ever meet, but they also supply some of the highest-quality beef products in the county. On June 1st, approximately 20 people gathered to delve into the rich history of their land, which has proudly borne their family name since 1931. Over the years, they have adeptly adjusted their farming practices to meet both generational demands and

the evolving needs of consumers. This Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) education event was conducted in partnership with MSU Extension, offering attendees invaluable insights into various system aspects, including diverse pasture establishment, transitioning to pasture-raised cattle, rotational grazing, fencing and watering systems, marketing and sales, and more.

It was a superlative evening to come together on their picturesque piece of land, gaining a deeper

understanding why rotational livestock grazing is advantageous and a critical component of a regenerative farm system. One of the key highlights of this event was delving into the details of their rotational systems, revealing why this humane and regenerative approach to beef production holds the promise of a brighter agricultural future. It is truly refreshing to witness this ideal regenerative model right in the heart of Benzie County.

Keeping Michigan Produce Safe

by Breanna Hannula

The Michigan On-Farm Produce Safety Program (MIOFPS) provides free education and technical assistance via Produce Safety Technicians (PST) who are housed at select Conservation Districts throughout the state of Michigan. Produce safety is the practice in which produce items, specifically fruits and vegetables that are typically consumed raw, are managed with the intention of reducing the risk of pathogens and foodborne illness. Growers can

receive confidential, free support by connecting with a PST for a variety of services, such as individualized on-farm technical assistance and training, and the Michigan Produce Safety Risk Assessment tool and certificate. Benzie County has a range of fresh produce grown, and anyone who grows and sells fresh produce is eligible to participate in MIOFPS.

There genuinely is no catch and no hidden costs. In fact, growers may save money by participating

in cost-share programs, where the PST can help pay for specific items to aid the grower's progress towards produce safety. In 2024, the MIOFPS Team will continue offering education and promoting produce safety throughout the state.

NRCS Success

by Kimberly Kirkpatrick

Pictured right: high tunnel at Bendon Blossoms. Photo credit: Kimberly Kirkpatrick, September 2023.



The Bear Lake Service Center of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) saw a productive year with the implementation of many conservation practices on private land, with contracts ranging from one to five years in length on average. NRCS programs support private landowner conservation projects, such as planting trees and pollinator habitat, managing brush and treating invasive species, helping farmers with various conservation efforts such as the installation of high tunnels and cover crops, and more. The funding for these programs for the last five years came from the 2018 Farm Bill, and future funding will come from future Farm Bills. Bear Lake services both Manistee and Benzie Counties.



Pictured above: hoop house at Ken's Farm LLC. Photo credit: Kimberly Kirkpatrick, September 2023.

Benzie County farmers, both beginning and established, participated in NRCS programs this year for cattle farming and crop production, which included fruit, vegetables, and livestock feed. Beginning farmers are those that have been farming for less than ten years. Many of the beginning farmers are producing market vegetables, and some are even producing flowers for sale at markets and roadside stands. Let's take a closer look at a couple of Benzie County beginning farmers.

Ken's Farm LLC is a beginning farmer and just completed installation of his first practice, which was the high tunnel (hoop house). He also has a few other practices to install over the next few years, including brush management and cover crops. His farm has been slowly growing over the years and his hoop house has been developing, too. He started out with a homemade hoop house, and in September 2023, he had a Nifty Hoops one installed that is 30 feet by 72 feet covering 2,160 square feet. NRCS did a cost-share for the installation of the high tunnel to help offset the initial cost to the beginning farmer.

There are a few things that the client/farmer needs to adhere to during and after signing an NRCS contract. In Ken's case, his contract requires him to maintain the high tunnel practice for five years. He also must use it only for growing crops and not as a storage facility or anything

else. Ken is very excited about the potential of producing crops earlier and longer with his hoop house, since it has a double layer roof and various ventilation methods to control the temperature.

Our next beginning farmer is Gabby from Bendon Blossoms. They have owned their property for three years and have been a client of NRCS for a couple years now. They have installed a few different practices, including brush management for invasive species, crop rotation, and a high tunnel. Their high tunnel is from Farmers Friend, and like Ken, they received cost-share for the installation of their high tunnel. It has been installed for over 6 months.

Gabby loves having the high tunnel since it allows her to overwinter flowers, giving her an early start to the growing season. An early start also means a longer growing season. Gabby stated that the flowers start blooming in April with the hoop house.

Both Gabby and Ken state that the process of applying for an NRCS contract was easy and that the office staff are great with communication and helping with any questions that they had. Gabby said the one-on-one walkthrough with NRCS was fantastic! She gave NRCS a "10 out of 10," saying, ***"they made it easy, and we got everything that we wanted."*** Ken is ready to do more and states, "who wouldn't want to do the cost-share?"



Pictured above: milkweed pods in autumn. Photo credit: Jane Perrino.

Native Planting with Go Beyond Beauty

by Audrey Menninga

Go Beyond Beauty is a program that supports garden professionals and community members who commit to not using or selling high priority ornamental invasive species. This program began with the Invasive Species Network (ISN), and as of 2022, now operates statewide.

This year, in ISN’s four-county service area, Go Beyond Beauty gained 12 new community participants and one new Nursery! We also had our most successful Japanese Barberry Trade-Up Days yet—where 683 invasive barberries were traded in for coupons to participating Go Beyond Beauty businesses over three events in Benzie, Grand Traverse, and Manistee Counties, double the amount collected in 2022.

Shelly Stusick, Go Beyond Beauty Specialist, put on and attended many other events, but none quite as large as the Native Plant Expo in Ann Arbor this past June. With over 2,000 attendees milling about, she was a speaker and tabled the event. Some other notable occasions were her NotMISpecies webinar (offered by the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy) and two MLive articles highlighting or mentioning Go Beyond Beauty.

On the statewide front, two official partnerships were solidified, creating two new Go Beyond Beauty Hubs: Central Michigan CISMA and CAKE CISMA. This means Go Beyond Beauty is now offered in 15 Michigan counties!

The following received funding from grants or contributions in fiscal year 2023 (October 2022 through September 2023):

General operations:
the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Operating Grant.

Lake monitoring:
the Huron-Manistee National Forest Partnership Agreement with Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funding.

Platte River Watershed Protection Plan Update:
Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy.

Platte and Betsie River Cleanups:
MiCorps Volunteer Stream Cleanup Program, Michigan State University.

Solar panel feasibility exploration:
Rotary Charities Seed Grant.

Great Lakes Aquatic Invasive Species Landing Blitz:
Great Lakes Commission.

Two summer field members:
AmeriCorps VISTA Program

Aquatic Invasive Species Pathways Program:
Michigan Invasive Species Grant Program, funded through the Quality of Life Departments: Department of Natural Resources; Department of Agricultural and Rural Development; and Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy. This program was also supported by contributions from the Grand Traverse Long Lake Foundation and from Benzie County Townships: Almira, Benzonia, Blaine, Crystal Lake, Homestead and Lake.

To our community

Thank you to all the individuals, organizations, and partners who helped further our impact in fiscal year 2023 (October 2022 through September 2023) through financial support and gifts of time.

Over 130 stewards supported healthy habitats by dedicating their time at our fiscal year 2023 volunteer programs:

Russ & Renee Abate	Roberta Dow	Elizabeth Hawthorne	Irene & Paul Marcussen	Sawyer Robinson
Leticia Amancio	Mike Downs	Sarah Hehir	Nancy McCurick	Doug Rudy
Wayne Andersen	Sue Downs	James Heinrich	Diane Miller	Josh Samberg
Emilie Anderson	Kate Easlick	Bill Henning	Elsa Miller	Lori Sanders
Emily Anderson	Robert Ely	Ron Heverly	Jacqui Morgenstein	Jake Siegel
Pete Ayers	Brandon Falenski	Howard Hollinger	Ryan Morris	Debbie & Jerry Smith
Carole Backman	Cait Falenski	Rick & Deb Horner	Kevan Newman	Allyson Tinker
Kim Balke	Pamela Fay	Laura & Vincent Huerta	Jim Niemann	Mary Ann Tomaszewski
Cheryl Bartz	Christian First	Roseanne Jamrok	Carrie Olmsted	Paul Ton
Paul Callam	Bob Fitch	Mark Janeczko	Matthew Overstreet	Dan & Ellie Trigg
James Chapman	Norm Fred	Chris Johnson	Kristin Page	Avery Van Aken
Jeff Clark	Mike Foley	Dennis Johnson	Margie Peacock	Victoria Velting
Cathy Cole	Susan Foster	Jim Keglovitz	Margie Pearsall-Groenwald	Dennis Wiand
Theresa Cook	Diana Gaines	Logan Kennedy	Linda Pelkey	Karen Wiand
Dan Dall'olmo	Barry Gaines	Jan Klemp	Saige Phelps	Bri Wieferich
Bill Davis	Rich Garvey	Harry Knol	Annalise Povolo	Susan Wilgus
Jen Davis	Lisa Gates	Tim Komoll	Marlene Puska	Gerald Wilgus
Brittany Defilippo	John Gerty	Bob Kondek	Carol Rademacher	Laurie Wilkins
Mary Devon	Edie Gibbs	Larry Kondek	Lonnie Rademacher	Brian Wolf
Ed Dewey	Lynn Gregory	Mary Laskowski	Don Raiff	Barb York
Cynthia Dickey	Paul Gregory	Abbi Laurentius	Tim Ransom	Michigan Geocaching
Terry Dickey	Doug Griese	Debbie Lipneyr	Ruthy Ransom	Organization participants
Victor Dinsmoore	Rich Groenwald	Mike Little	David Regalbuto	at the Betsie River Clean
Jen Domulin	Marietta Hamody	Terry MacKay	Jamie Robinson	Sweep

Special thanks to our fiscal year 2023 donors, whose gifts have been instrumental in supporting conservation efforts in Benzie County:

Chuck Bissell	Bill & Ann Henning	Sue Kennedy	Gail Parry	Elizabeth Rodgers
Nancy & Robert Eggleston	Ron & Jan Heverly	Steve & Charmain Later	Tad & Margie Peacock	Paula Smeltzer
Michael Foley	Steve Huffstutler	Janet Lauerman	Lawrence Schultz, Pearl Lake Property Owners Association	Brandon Spader
Norm Fred	David & Deborah Jakubiec	Barbara McBride	Jeanne Peters	Steve Stephens
Lynn Gregory	John Keenan	Donna Paderewski		John & Lynn Vinkemulder



Pictured left: volunteers with litter removed from the Betsie River at our 2023 Clean Sweep.

Impact by the numbers

Through a diverse array of programs and services, we collaborate on a holistic approach for preserving and enhancing all types of local environments.



Aquatic Invasive Species Pathways Program (AISPP)

- With 60 volunteers, provided free boat decontamination and education at 15 lakes throughout 4 Northern Michigan counties.
- Throughout 38 events, worked with 1,985 launch site users to survey 703 boats, and decontaminated 389 that were determined to be potential transporters of aquatic invasive species.
- Surveyed 25 lake access sites for aquatic invasive species.

Educational outreach

- Hosted or collaborated on 61 educational events.
- Directly reached 662 school-aged youth.
- Hosted 5 community-science-driven conservation events with over 90 volunteers (excluding AISPP events and participants).
- Supported over 550 public inquiries by phone, email, office visits, and social media conversations.

Invasive Species Network (ISN)**

- 318 public inquiry responses.
- 745 acres surveyed; 235.5 treated.
- 141 sites surveyed; 148 treated.
- Total ISN-specific impressions: 288,299.
- Total Go Beyond Beauty-specific impressions: 716,463.

Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP)*

- 21 risk reduction practices implemented.
- 10 assessments completed, and 4 farms and 8 systems verified.
- \$708.93 cost share dollars spent.
- 2 MAEAP Phase 1 Events held, with 65 total attendees.

Forestry Assistance Program (FAP)*

- 33 landowner site visits, totaling 1,295.06 acres.
- Hosted or supported over 20 educational programs across multiple counties with nearly 500 participants.
- Helped collect data on 102 trees participating in the Assisted Tree Range Expansion Project across three counties.

“Like many at the Benzie Conservation District, it feels right working to protect the area that made me fall in love with the outdoors in the first place.”

— Mike Schwartz,
Aquatic Invasive
Species Technician

Water Quality Monitoring

- Monitored 8 lakes and 28 stream sites (including 9 sites through the Volunteer Stream Monitoring Program).
- Surveyed 22 miles of Crystal Lake’s shoreline for cladophora, a native algae that indicates nutrient inputs.
- Collectively surveyed 40 miles of shoreline (including Crystal Lake).

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)*

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), with 2018 Farm Bill funding: 2 contracts, totaling 520 acres, at \$35,447.
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), with 2018 Farm Bill funding: 5 contracts, totaling 828 acres, at \$110,327.

Michigan On-Farm Produce Safety Program (MIOFPS)*

- Aided in hosting 7 Produce Safety Alliance Grower Trainings virtually and in-person.
- Collaborated and hosted 6 community and educational events.
- Attended 15 grower networking events.



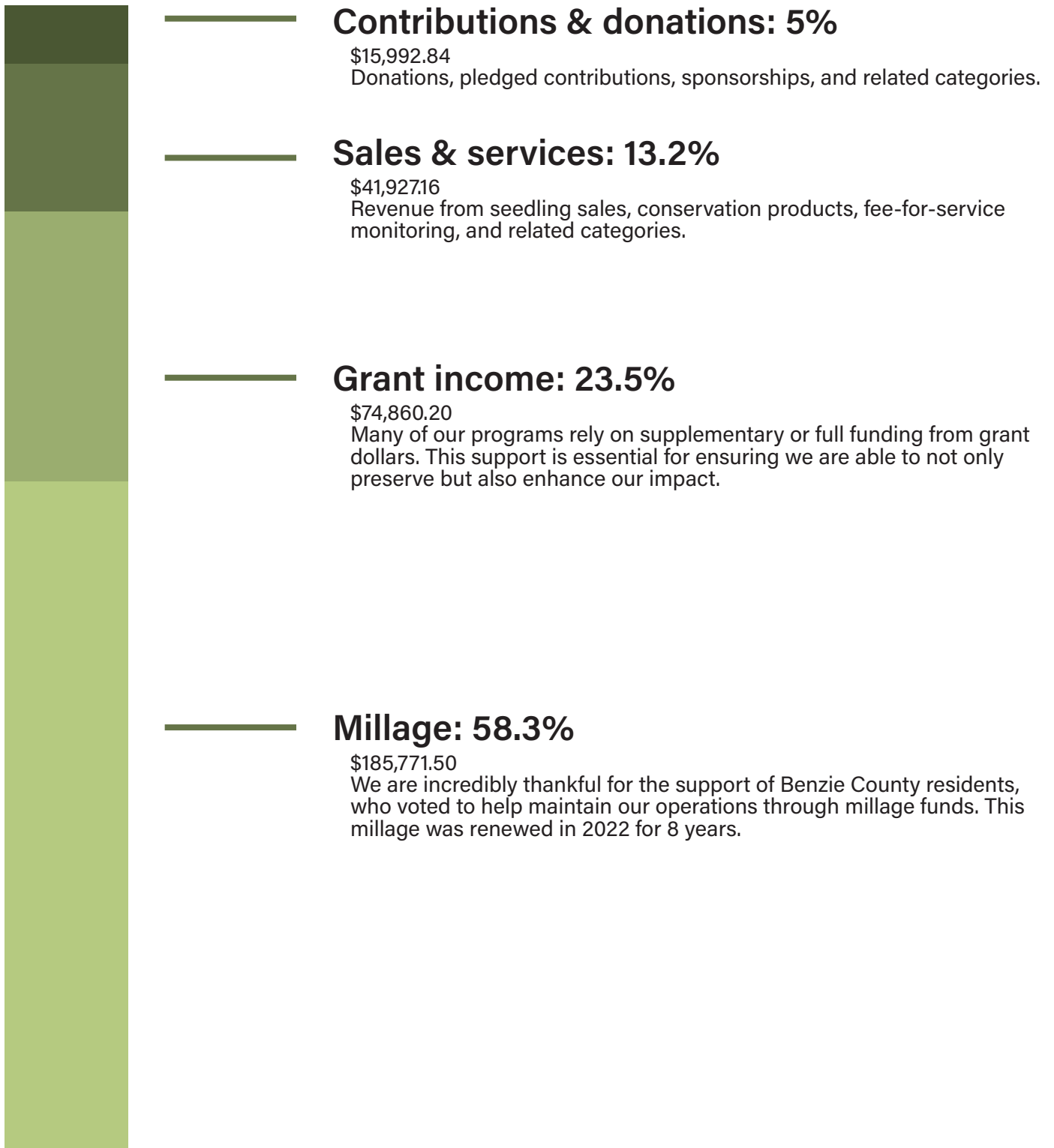
Pictured above: aquatic invasive species reminder sign at Lower Herring Lake.

Pictured far left: Hemlock woolly adelgid.

Financial Report

Fiscal year from October 2022 through September 2023

Sources of total income: \$318,551.70



Purposes of total expenses: \$334,974.23



Fundraising: 5.1%

\$17,000.92

Staff time and supplies needed for fund development projects.

Administration: 9.6%

\$32,303.01

Operational costs and related expenses.

Program operations: 85.3%

\$285,670.30

All expenses related to maintaining and implementing our programs, including seedling sales. In addition, as a small team, many of our staff fulfill multiple responsibilities. Staff wages are reflected across all categories displayed (administration, fundraising, and program operations) based on amount of time spent supporting each category.

Natural resources preservation is a constant, growing need. To address emerging issues, we actively invest in ways to enhance our program operations so we may better serve our community. If you would like to know more about our finances, you are always welcome to attend our board meetings, at which the Benzie Conservation District Board of Directors reviews our monthly financial reports. Our Board of Directors meets most months at our office in downtown Beulah, and the public is invited to attend these conversations and provide input. Learn more on our website at www.benziecd.org.

Education

To support accessible environmental education, we have embraced opportunities to serve as a technical and informational resource hub, enhance our skills across professions, and connect with local students and educators.



Pictured above: the botanizing float on Little Platte Lake. Photo credit: John Ransom.

Bolstering natural resources education

Three ways we are providing educational opportunities

When we actively learn about our natural environment, we are better equipped to understand and protect it. Benzie County is fortunate to be home to so many passionate stewards interested in learning more about how they can care for the environment.

In fact, in our most recent Natural Resources Assessment (2022), nearly 60% of respondents agreed that one of the most important things we can do for our community is to provide more environmental education opportunities.

As Benzie County's information hub for all things natural resources, we aim to fill this gap by creating connections, empowering landowners, and strengthening our own skills so that we may best support the conservationists of today and tomorrow. Read on to see a few ways our staff have worked toward our vision for environmental education.

“Learning aquatic plant species, invasive and native, was very enlightening being that I like to spend a lot of time on the water. Now I have a better understanding how it affects me; it’s not just all ‘seaweed,’ it’s an underwater forest, an ecosystem.”

— Zak Gipps, AmeriCorps
VISTA Member

1. Connecting with landowners for site visits

by Ellie Johnson

The majority of what I do is speak with landowners during one-on-one onsite property visits. These can be powerful conversations that have the potential to bring a lot of change to the landscape, and now that my second year as District Forester has wrapped up, I've been able to witness some of my landowners' efforts as I drive around the region.

Nothing brings me joy quite like seeing a field of well-planted seedlings in their tree tubes, or a cleared patch of autumn olive, or an American Tree Farm sign proudly displayed by someone's driveway. Each of

these observations brings me validation to what I do, and helps confirm that these site visits are truly an impactful resource in empowering landowners to exercise good forest stewardship.

As you move forward in your own land management actions, please consider keeping me updated on any progress (or setbacks!). I appreciate any time someone lets me learn alongside them as it just helps me be a better resource for the community in the long term.

2. Building connections through professional development

by Ellie Johnson

As an early career professional myself, I find strengthening my technical skills and my relationships to partnering individuals and organizations to be the two most important ways to stay relevant in my job. Something I realized early on as I romped around my three counties is that I get to work with some amazing groups, but those folks don't often get to associate with each other in person.

To increase collaboration and connection between folks, I started organizing Botanizing Hikes, which are educational and networking opportunities for natural resource professionals. Each event has a co-hosting organization, a topic tied to plant identification, and a new public area to explore together. I've done these with Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy (GTRLC) at their Hickory Forest property (discussing spring ephemerals this past May) and Lower Woodcock Lake (identifying wetland indicator species this past fall); Grand Traverse Conservation District at Timbers Recreation Area (advising on bud and bark identification for woody species); and Benzie Conservation District for a botanizing float on Little Platte Lake (where Dr. Jo Latimore helped us with submerged aquatics).

I have numerous ideas for next year's topics, and I look forward to continuing this series and observing how it helps keep our region's environmental organizations engaged with one another.



Pictured above: aquatic plant samples examined at the botanizing float. Photo credit: Ellie Johnson.

3. Hosting educational activities and workshops

Beyond being a resource hub for individuals, the Benzie Conservation District actively engages with local educators to support group learning. In 2023, we led customized activities for a variety of youth programs, including public schools, a private school, a daycare, and even a summer camp. Many of our other educational events this year were supported or hosted by partnering environmental groups, and we believe it is through close collaboration that we can best support future conservationists. Looking ahead, we're excited to continue networking with local educators and developing even more group learning activities for Benzie County youth.

Whether you're a local educator hoping to bring nature to your classroom, a property owner with questions about land management, or are just curious about Benzie County's amazing natural resources, we're here to support your conservation journey. Contact us today at 231-882-4391 or info@benziecd.org to learn more about our educational programming.

“What surprised me the most was how much fun I had with projects and how I felt I made a difference in education about conservation in Benzie. The Benzie Conservation District staff allowed me to take the lead with wild rice education, good boat washing practices, and answering questions from the public when scoring the shore for Crystal Lake.”

— Jen Burfield,
AmeriCorps
VISTA Member



What's next?

- Update the Platte River Watershed Protection Plan
- Develop free, public resources about aquatic invasive species
- Expand natural resources education opportunities for youth
- Increase collaboration with the Benzie Watershed Coalition
- Continue long-term water quality monitoring
- Continue cleanup programs with community volunteers
- ...and much more!

Save the date: 2023 Annual Meeting

Please join us **Thursday, December 7th, 2023**, for our Annual Meeting! This year, the meeting will take place at the Mills Community House in Benzonia starting at 6:00pm.

Our featured guest speaker is Sam Wolfe, Co-founder and Executive Director of Sleeping Bear Wildlife Fund. This new nonprofit provides sanctuary and rehabilitation services for mammals in Northern Michigan and has been instrumental in supporting Benzie County's wildlife.

Letter from the Executive Director

Wow, what an incredible year it has been. I began my time at the Benzie Conservation District at the start of the New Year to open arms and an outpouring of support from our staff, board directors, and community members. I cannot adequately express how grateful I am to be here, serving all residents and visitors of Benzie County to preserve and enhance our world-class natural resources. This is a dream come true, and I thank you for the trust you've given me.

It has been a year of significant transitions for us at the District. Three of our six permanent staff members have started since last October, including Jessica Barnard, our Communications and Administrative Coordinator, Kyla Robinson, our Aquatic Invasive Species Coordinator, and myself. Despite our relatively short tenure, we have an unbelievably talented, passionate staff that is dedicated to our community and our cause.

We opened this year's annual report with our strategic direction, which is the direct result of conversations with our partners, our staff's expert opinion, and the more than 300 responses from you, our community of supporters, and members of the public.

As a result, you can expect to see big things from us in the coming year. Within our three focus areas of preserving and enhancing our land and water, and

providing environmental education, we have already started making significant progress that will have an immediate and lasting impact for generations to come.

We are actively working to bolster the Benzie Watershed Coalition, a collaborative group of nonprofits, lake associations, and government partners, led by the Conservation District, focused on comprehensive management of the watersheds across Benzie County.

We are building crucial relationships with educators to help school-aged kids learn about and appreciate our natural resources to foster the next generation of conservation leaders.

We are collaborating with our partners to understand and strengthen the protection of land through sustainable management practices. Benzie County is a beautiful place to live, work, and play, and the secret is out. We must be able to welcome our new community members with open arms, knowing that our healthy water quality, sensitive ecosystems, and high-quality habitats are protected.

Despite all of the challenges to our environment, we are excited for the future, knowing that we have an incredible community here in Benzie County that cares about natural resources. Thank you. We could not do this without you!

—Jon Throop, Executive Director



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