



Van Buren Conservation District

November 2025 Program Update

Submitted by Emily Hickmott, Executive Director

The VBCD staff has returned to the office with the reopening of the federal government. We are grateful to all of the partners that lent us and offered their meeting space and assistance during that time. We are writing many grant applications right now and planning upcoming events. Contact information is available at VanBurenCD.org/about to find out how our team can best help you. Our full board reports can be found on our website as well.

Did you know? Conservation districts are designed to address *local* resource concerns. We depend on input from the people of Van Buren County to address the most important issues in our own backyards. To help guide us, we conduct a Conservation Needs Assessment at least every five years. Our latest from 2025, indicated that the top five resource concerns in Van Buren County are:

1. Proper use and disposal of farm chemicals/fertilizers
2. Forest/woodland loss due to housing, business, and farmland development
3. Drinking water/groundwater
4. Pollinator populations
5. Recycling/proper garbage disposal

Didn't get a chance to complete the survey? Send us your concerns, questions, and ideas for conservation anytime!

Upcoming Events (Details available on [our website](#)):

- Staff training: Michigan State University Facilitated Meeting Workshop | December 2-4
- Staff training: Michigan Association of Conservation Districts Annual Conference | December 7-10
- Staff training: Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable, & Farm Market Expo | December 9-11
- Small Grower Meeting | December 10
- Van Buren Conservation District Board Meeting | Wednesday, December 17, 2025 | 10:00 AM | VBCD Office / USDA Service Center | 1035 E Michigan Ave., Paw Paw, MI 49079
- Office Closed for Christmas | December 25 and for New Year's Day | January 1

Program Updates:

- **Ag Conservation/Water Quality Projects** (*Erin Fuller and Colleen Forestieri*) - Staff coordinated the planting of nearly 300 new native trees and shrubs in southwest Michigan as part of a grant project through the Van Buren Conservation District and Michigan Lakes and Streams Association. This project offers landowners on six lakes in southwest Michigan (Round, Gravel, and Eagle Lakes in Van Buren County and Harwood, Birch, and Baldwin Lakes in Cass County) the opportunity to have native trees and shrubs planted on their properties. These plantings will reduce runoff, improve the quality of water in our lakes and



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streams, and provide valuable wildlife habitat. This project is made possible by a Great Lakes Restoration Initiative grant through the Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

- **SWxSW Corner Cisma (Cooperative Invasive Species Management Area) Team** (*Abbie Bristol, Alex Florian, Jena Johnson*) – We have wrapped up the year’s field season work and are pivoting to planning for 2026. We completed Road Commission management in record time, treating and monitoring over 500 Phragmites and Japanese knotweed sites in Van Buren County. All despite the challenges presented by the government shutdown. Based on the Watch List invasive species concerns from 2025, we have synthesized the necessary responses into three projects, submitted to the Michigan Invasive Species Grant Program.
- **Coastal Resilience Outreach and Education Project** (*Jena Johnson*) – We completed the “Protecting Van Buren County Coastal Areas Through Outreach and Education” grant project, funded by EGLE and NOAA. This included hosting a “Dune Day” educational event; designing and distributing an educational mailer to over 5,000 households; and designing, building, and hosting an event centered around an educational library display, all for coastal residents of Van Buren County. Jena also attended municipal meetings for the coastal communities of VBC and collaborated with Covert Township officials.
- **Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) and Regen Ag Program** (*Kyle Mead*) – The specialist set goals for the upcoming year, including 12 soil health tests, 18 soil health assessments, and 120 completed risk reductions. He is available to work with landowners to adopt practices that reduce risk, improve prosperity and ecosystems, and increase food systems in our region.
- **National Association of Conservation Districts (NRCs) Technical Assistance** (*Lucas Hartman, Gabriel Francisco*) – The technicians met with producers and developing EQIP plans to ensure that, once federal operations resumed, all materials were ready for timely submission helping to minimize further delays for participating farmers. In addition to these efforts, they are working on the grant application that funds their positions.
- **Outreach** (*Jacob Diljak*) – Work on the annual report is well underway, along with the 2026 Food, Farm, & Fun Guide. Additionally, VBCD staff held the fall Volunteer Water Monitoring event – an event where we monitor water health throughout the county with volunteers.
- **Resource Recovery & Recycling** (*Kalli Marshall, Jacob Diljak*) – The team held public educational events like Sustainable Samplers and Battery Safety Day with South Haven Area Emergency Service. We concluded the collection season with the Lawrence Recycle Roundup – serving over 180 households for recycling and safe disposal of a variety of materials. Kalli concluded the NextCycle Michigan Accelerator Showcase Pitch Competition, and was awarded \$5,000.00 for recycling improvements in Van Buren County.