

# The MLICA Scoop



Fall 2015

## From the Lead Plow, Ben Foster, President MLICA

Well, it's that time of year again, "the busy season". As the crops are coming off, I hope all of you have plenty of work to do. From my observation, the low crop prices may be impacting business a bit, by lowering the "backlog" but as many of my customers know "you pay for tile whether you put them in or not".

There has been a rumor that a "tile permit" or "tile fee" is being discussed in some areas. We would like anyone that has heard anything like this to let Scott Everett know, so we can follow up. I checked with my Drain Commission and they had not heard anything.

Preliminary contacts for a 2016 Field Day directed towards Managing Phosphorus runoff have been made with MSU Extension and received a positive response. We hope to establish some developed and experimental practices for Phosphorus control with MSU and would like to discuss the implementation with all of you during the Winter Meeting.

Speaking of the Winter Meeting, please plan on attending starting on Sunday afternoon/evening, January 17 for the Board meeting and Social/Game time, associate interaction and dinner. Monday the 18<sup>th</sup> will have the bulk of the presentations and some may want to stay over and have breakfast on the 19<sup>th</sup>. More details will follow.

The EPA Rule on "The Waters of the United States" is in litigation and probably will be for quite a while, however, if anyone hears anything being done in this area by EPA, MDEQ or others, please let us know, so we can keep track of it.

Everyone have a safe and productive fall season.

Ben Foster  
Foster Trenching, Inc.  
President MLICA



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# 2015 Summer Picnic Highlights

By Sarah Cook, Executive Director

It was great to see all of you that were able to make our summer picnic at the AIS Lansing Training Facility! I always enjoy catching up with MLICA members, and seeing everyone having a great time.

**THANK YOU Perry Strimback**, and **AIS** for being wonderful hosts! Thank you, as well, to **ADS** for providing refreshing beverages and **Dave Franks** for the sweet corn!

Perry, knowing we all have a competitive side, put together a skills competition. It was definitely fun to watch everyone put their skills to the test by placing a bowling pin dangling on a chain on the bucket of an excavator inside PVC tubes. The fastest time was impressive, coming in at just 52 seconds. But the most impressive was an up and coming operator, **Emma Young**, just age 10 at the time, coming in with a time of 3 minutes and 51 seconds! She was persistent and didn't give up! It's great to see such young people learning to operate equipment!

Perry didn't want to leave out the younger kids, so he found a John Deere Gator at a garage sale, and reconditioned it. He put it up for silent auction, with anything over the \$250 he spent



Pictured in photo:  
Emma Young, age 10, competing  
in the skills competition.  
Great job Emma!



Pictured in photo above:  
Morgan Cook posing next to the  
John Deere Gator that was up for  
silent auction.

reconditioning it being donated to MLICA. All the younger kids were ecstatic when the auction was over, because they finally got to drive it!

Check out more photos from our summer picnic on the next page!

Make sure to mark your calendars for our winter convention coming up in January, and keep an eye out for registration forms in the mail.

I look forward to seeing all of you at our winter convention!



MLICA Winter Convention  
January 17th—19th  
Ramada Lansing Hotel and  
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2016 National LICA Winter  
Convention  
Drury Plaza Hotel Riverwalk  
San Antonio, Texas  
February 29 – March 6



Top scores for skills competition:

1st Place, Adam Cook, 52 seconds

2nd Place, Ben Cook, 1 minute

3rd Place, Nate Cook, 1 minute 13 seconds

4th Place (tied), Ben Foster and Derek Foster,  
1 minute 16 seconds



Perry Strimback talking to everyone as we got ready to eat.

Pictured in left photo, starting from left: Ben Foster, Mike Cook, Marleen Foster, Russ Talaski, Joann Talaski, Perry Strimback (at top of stairs), and Kim Cook

Pictured in photo below, starting from left: Will Word, Scott Everett, Larry Cook, John Cook, and Trevor Young



Marleen Foster and Joann Talaski chatting with Scott Everett



Kelly Young taking a photo of Eli Young and Morgan Cook driving around in the Gator... way more fun than playing ring toss or balancing wooden eggs on spoons!



Starting from left: Larry Cook just happened to look as the picture was taken; & Perry Strimback watching Damien Foster and Morgan Cook ride around in the Gator. Kim Cook and Kelly Young in conversation in the background.



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Watching the skills competition. Pictured in photo above, starting from left: Emma Young, Russ Talaski, John Cook, Ben Cook, Adam Cook, Nate Cook, Mike Cook, Scott Everett

## State officials say they've nearly reached goal for Lake Erie, critics say "not so fast"

Michigan officials are taking a victory lap in their efforts to reduce the amount of phosphorus flowing from state farms and other sources into Lake Erie. The Michigan Department of Agriculture officials claim Michigan has nearly met its goal of a 40% reduction in phosphorus from the Detroit River and the River Raisin.

Critics, however, say the self-congratulation is misleading.

### Keeping phosphorus on farms

Michigan has focused a lot of time, money and resources on phosphorus reduction in Monroe County. A number of programs, both state-funded and federally-funded, offer incentives to farmers to keep water and nutrients like phosphorus on their land, rather than flowing into the river and lake. State officials took media on a tour to highlight what's been going on. The first stop was Bob Vajcner's farm in Monroe County, just a few miles from the River Raisin, which flows into Lake Erie.

"The Great Lakes is one of our biggest water resources in the world, and if they ruin it, what are we going to have?" Vajcner asks. Over the years, Vajcner made a lot of changes to keep phosphorus from migrating away from his farm. He planted trees for wind breaks to slow soil erosion. He took some land out of production for buffer strips, to keep water and sediment on the farm. And he installed an underground irrigation system along with structures that can store excess water until needed.

"And it has worked really good," Vajcner says, "because we can retain a lot of our moisture that comes down, and rainfall and stuff, to stay in the soil rather than draining off right away and carrying nutrients with it."

While the state did take one mandatory measure, a big one, by tightening the permit for the Detroit water treatment plant, state officials chose Vajcner's farm to showcase the power of voluntary actions to cut phosphorus.

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State officials say the data is preliminary, but it appears to show a 49% reduction in phosphorus from the River Raisin, and a nearly 40% reduction from the Detroit River.

In June, Michigan, Ohio and Ontario agreed to each reduce their phosphorus levels going into Lake Erie 40% by the year 2025. Michigan, it appears, has already reached the goal. Jamie Clover Adams is Director of the Michigan Department of Agriculture. She says the River Raisin data is proof we don't need to regulate farms more.

"Voluntary practices worked," she says. Environmentalists scoff at the notion.

"I'm just pretty shocked that anyone would say, 'We've got a reduction, we've met our goal, and we're there,' when in fact, that is not the way the algae in Lake Erie is going to be reduced," says Sandy Bihn of Lake Erie Waterkeeper.

***Bihn says focusing on total phosphorus is a red herring, and that Michigan officials have even agreed with her in meetings that the problem is not total phosphorus, but dissolved phosphorus, which cyanobacteria can easily use.***

Bihn says focusing on total phosphorus is a red herring, and that Michigan officials have even agreed with her in meetings that the problem is not total phosphorus, but dissolved phosphorus, which cyanobacteria can easily use.

And she says the level of dissolved phosphorus in Lake Erie has at least doubled in recent years — despite total phosphorus declining in the Detroit River, the River Raisin, and the Maumee River.

"Things are not getting better," says Bihn, "and voluntary measures are not enough. There is just a huge resistance to do what's needed to get the lake on the road to recovery," she says.

Mike Shriberg of the National Wildlife Federation agrees. "The pure voluntary programs are clearly not solving the problem," says Shriberg. "All you have to do is look at Lake Erie to know that."

Michigan Radio asked state officials to comment on the issue of total phosphorus versus dissolved phosphorus.

We did not receive a reply.

## Fingerprinting at others (we're talking about you, Ohio)

The effort to clean up the lake is not Michigan's alone. Ohio, Ontario, and Indiana are also involved.

So the next stop on the tour was a boat ride in Lake Erie to look at some of the other players

We passed by a dredging machine, its claw lifting huge scoops of sediment to clear the channel near Toledo.

The dredging is conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Michigan officials say they've asked the Corp to find a place on the land to dump the sediment, which has phosphorus in it, instead of dumping it deeper in the lake.

So far, the Corps has declined to do this, citing cost. Then we pass the Toledo water intake, which was surrounded by a bloom of toxic cyanobacteria in the summer

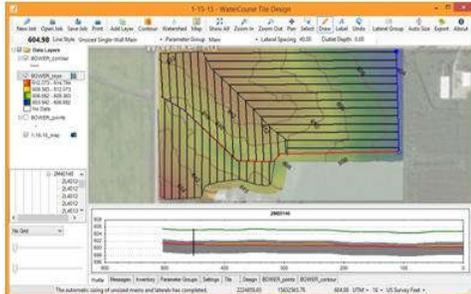
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*(Continued from page 7)*

of 2014. For two days, Toledo and some Monroe County, Michigan residents were warned not to drink, bathe in, or otherwise use the contaminated water.

Finally, the boat stops at the mouth of the Maumee River. In the distance, a ship can be seen heading up the river, to stop at one of the salt docks or coal docks in Ohio.

Bill Creal is with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality

He says the Maumee is putting huge amounts of phosphorus into the lake, and Michigan has only about 7% of the farmland near the Maumee.

“So we've all got to work on the Maumee River together to come up with a successful solution, because that is the big contributor to the algae blooms,” Creal says.

Creal says Ohio has a lot of heavy lifting to do to reduce phosphorus, in part because the farmland near the Maumee is heavily saturated with phosphorus from years and years of heavy fertilizer applications.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources did not get back to us for this story.

### **So are we really there yet?**

Not even close, say environmentalists like Shriberg and Bihn. The summer of 2015 was the second worst on record for cyanobacteria blooms. Environmentalists say the only solution is for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to step in and declare the waters of the western Lake Erie basin "impaired."

That would force each state contributing to the problem to take much more aggressive action, and more closely track the efforts and the results.

But Michigan officials insist voluntary measures such as the ones being utilized on Bob Vajcner's farm are working. They say there are about 85 additional farms in the basin that are ready to enroll in programs designed to reduce phosphorus levels.

But, this will require patience and time, say those officials. After all, the lake didn't get polluted with phosphorus overnight, and it won't be cleaned up overnight, either.

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## Eye in the Sky

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are generating a lot of buzz in the agriculture sector lately. The rapidly evolving technology is giving farmers the ability to understand what's happening in their fields like never before, and new rules coming down the pipeline on both sides of the border have the potential to open up new opportunities to put these powerful machines to work. Drainage contractors too stand to benefit from adopting UAV technology into their operations.

There are two types of UAVs: a fixed-wing model that flies like a miniature airplane, and a rotor model that can hover in place like a miniature helicopter. Both models can be kitted out with cameras and sensors to deliver a bird's-eye view of a farm, providing a snapshot of field conditions. To capture this data, the UAV flies multiple passes overhead, constantly snapping pictures to ensure complete coverage of the survey area. These pictures are then stitched together and can be imported into geographic information system (GIS) or computer-assisted design (CAD) software, allowing the user to study the aerial images and pinpoint areas that require closer inspection by a trained human eye to diagnose what's at the root of any trouble spots.

"The bird's eye view lets you get the holistic view of the field, and that's a big help. You can see very clearly the differences in the field based on drainage, evaporation rates and things like that, particularly surveying after a rainstorm. It gives contractors a view of the field that they can't really get any other way," says Ernest Earon, founder of PrecisionHawk.

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## Eye in the Sky Cont.

The company, with headquarters in Raleigh, N.C., and satellite offices across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and India, provides a complete system for aerial surveying. It's designed to be user-friendly: simply throw the UAV into the air and it will fly multiple transects over a pre-programmed area to collect a complete survey of the field. PrecisionHawk's UAV can fly in rain, snow and wind up to 40 to 45 km/hour. Above this threshold, the wind can compromise the efficiency of the survey. If the machine, which monitors flight conditions in real-time, determines wind speeds are too high, it will turn around and land so the survey can be attempted at a later time, under more favourable conditions.

The UAV can capture data on up to 500 acres in a single flight; a survey of this size can take up to an hour to complete. Users have access to a first look at the data within minutes of completing the survey. PrecisionHawk also turns the complete survey data package around quickly.

"Depending on the size and the intensity of the survey, we can have a completely processed photomosaic in your email inbox within an hour," Earon says. "For a very data intensive survey it might take several hours, but the idea is to get the information turned around as fast as we can."

## Member Highlights

### Foster Trenching, Inc.

Written by Ben Foster

I started in the business with my grandfather when I was 10 years old as the “target boy”. I would ride the tongue of the tile wagon and when the machine would approach a grade target, I would pull it and move it to the next string. I think I was making \$0.25/hr. From there I did all jobs including setting up grade stakes, placing tile, walking tile, backfilling and operating a wheel machine with grade stakes. I worked with him and my father until I was married in my junior year at MSU. After graduation, I worked for Goodyear Tire for 17 years and Shell Chemical for 3 years when I decided to take over the business in 1996. I moved back to Michigan from West Virginia in April of 1996. My wife, Marleen and two boys (BJ & Derek) moved back to Michigan in June of 1996 after the end of the school year. My dad Bill worked with me in 1996 and retired in 1997. Marleen managed the office while the boys finished high school and college. BJ is married and works in the Detroit area as an Engineering Manager. Derek is married with 2 children and finished a degree in computer networking, but decided to return home and work with me. Our intention is for Derek to continue the business as I slow down over the next few years.

Dad had always been a member of MLICA and I joined when we came back in 1996.

Our drainage business started with my grandfather in 1956 and has run continuously since, through 3 and now the 4<sup>th</sup> generation. We operate primarily in Gratiot and Isabella Counties and continue to work for many of the same families since the beginning. When I was in Mexico in the early 1980's my father decided to move to a Hoes plow and asked if I was interested in investing. I helped with the purchase of our first plow and was a partner in Foster and Foster Farms until I came back. Upon transfer of the business we moved from Foster's Trenching Service to Foster Trenching, Inc. We operated with the original Hoes 622 until 2012 when we purchased a 550 Bron double link plow. In 2014 we moved to a 550 Bron cantilever plow which we are operating today.

When I returned in 1996 the drainage business was not as robust as it has become in the last number of years. Upon returning, I became aware of much customer dissatisfaction in the local on-site wastewater treatment (septic) system area. I consulted with a member of the local Board of Health and was invited to present an alternative type of system for their consideration. In 1997 we gained approval and designed/installed the first on-site aerobic treatment unit (ATU) in Michigan in over 15 years. We designed and installed for a few years and then moved exclusively to design, supply and service of the Clearstream unit. We are now nearing 600 units installed. While this business has slowed in recent years with the housing bust, the drainage business has continued to grow as agriculture has increasingly come to value our product and service.

While the boys were young we followed their activities including travel team soccer, swimming, gymnastics and Boy Scouts with both boys achieving the rank of Eagle Scout. Marleen and I now spend our leisure time playing some golf, following the Spartans, riding our Harley and doing our best to spoil our two grandchildren Skylar and Dante.



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The MLICA Scoop welcomes letters, subject to editing for accuracy and brevity. The MLICA Scoop also welcomes articles relevant to the land improvement industry. All letters and articles can be emailed to [scook@michiganlica.org](mailto:scook@michiganlica.org). Please include your name and phone number for verification purposes.