Extension
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
MARATHON COUNTY

July 2025 Report

We teach, learn, lead, and serve,
connecting people with the University of Wisconsin, and engaging with them in transforming lives and communities.

4-H – Positive Youth Development

Holly Luerssen, 4-H Program Educator

- Marathon County 4-H's weekly summer workshops at the Boys and Girls Club provides hands-on learning experiences that sparked curiosity, built life skills, and encouraged creativity among participating youth. Through fun, engaging activities led by caring mentors, youth explored topics like science, art, and healthy living—helping them grow in confidence and discover new interests outside of school. Total Reach: 7 weeks program 20 youth in Elementary Center 15-20 youth in Teen Center
    - Partnering with the Boys and Girls Club allows Marathon County 4-H to reach youth who may not otherwise have access to positive, hands-on learning experiences that build life skills and foster a sense of belonging. Each Thursday during the summer, Marathon County 4-H leads weekly programs at the Boys and Girls Club, beginning with an hour-long session in the Elementary Center, followed by an hour in the Teen Center. Activities are tailored to each age group, providing hands-on learning opportunities that spark creativity, encourage problem-solving, and build meaningful connections. Sample Activities: making healthy snacks; magic tricks; art projects, STEM challenges, and more.
- A 3-day travel experience (Discover Wisconsin) for middle grade 4-H and adult advisors where they learned about Wisconsin's rich history and culture through travel to eastern Wisconsin. We stayed on a college campus and travelled to Door County, Manitowoc, and Green Bay locations during the day. This travel experience helped youth develop independence, youth voice, and flexibility. Total Reach: 36 youth 2 adult volunteers 7 adult staff
    - As middle grade youth (grades 5-8) begin to get more involved in sports and other extra-curricular activities at school, many choose to leave 4-H. Discover Wisconsin is a fun and active program just for this age group and it encourages youth to get actively involved in 4-H beyond the local club. The Discover Wisconsin program is a 3-day, 2-night experience that is designed with middle grade youth in mind. The activities help youth build friendships while staying engaged in other educational opportunities. Evaluation comments: "The adults are amazing and so fun to talk to!" "All they chaperones were awesome, and so thankful for the goody bag left from the tooth fairy." "I had so much fun and was glad I went on it for 3 years and was able to go on it for my last year and will miss it next year." "That I love this trip. The first discover Wisconsin introduced me into 4-H. I am so glad happy that you have this program. I hope you have this program for many years to come."
- Kids day camp is an program for youth in 5K-3rd grade. They engage a typical summer camp program rolled into one day. Total Reach: 13 Families with 10 youth in attendance.

- The Kids Day Camp is a one-day experience designed specifically for youth in 5K through 3rd grade. It offers participants a chance to enjoy the excitement of a traditional summer camp, all condensed into a fun-filled single day. Through hands-on activities and age-appropriate adventures, young campers engage in learning, exploration, and connection—creating lasting memories and a strong foundation for future 4-H involvement. Increased Confidence and Independence – Youth build self-confidence as they try new activities and make choices in a safe, supportive environment. Social Skill Development – Campers practice cooperation, communication, and teamwork while making new friends and working together in group activities. Sparked Interest in Learning – Hands-on, play-based experiences help youth discover new interests and a love for exploration, laying the groundwork for continued engagement in 4-H.

Agriculture

Heather Schlesser, Dairy Agent
Melissa Ohlrich, Regional Crops Educator

- Planning a hybrid workshop series for dairy and beef producers, and dairy workers (in Spanish) in September 2025. The goal is to provide information and techniques to boost cattle caretakers' confidence in preparing the cow for calving, obstetric techniques, and newborn calf care so that their health and reproductive programs maintain their farm's economic viability.
  - Local area livestock and dairy educators received requests for obstetric training. The economic viability of both livestock and dairy farms hinges on calving animals contributing young stock, and therefore, the farm's income from beef and dairy sales each year. Time and money are heavily invested in the farm's reproductive program to obtain a live calf from every breeding. The nutrition and health of the pregnant animal contribute to her potential for successful gestation, calving, future rebreeding, and a healthy calf. Newborn calf care provides the opportunity for calves to reach their full genetic potential as productive individuals for years to come. Educators Stuttgen, Schlesser, and Sterry upgraded their skills for teaching the obstetrics and calf care topics by attending the University of Nebraska Beef Extension 2025 Calving College Producer Education Series. Schlesser's Marathon County Extension office purchased a bovine calving model to use in this series. Schlesser and Stuttgen have previously taught obstetrics training for beef and dairy producers. As a bovine veterinarian, Stuttgen has lifelong experience in obstetrics. Lippert was invited to the planning group to provide instruction in dairy transition cow nutrition. During virtual classrooms and in-person hands-on training, dairy and beef producers will learn about transition cow diets and body condition to recognizing key signs of labor and handling difficult deliveries with precision, and gain practical strategies to support both cow and calf health. Dairy workers will have sessions dedicated to them that will be translated into Spanish. For the producer's convenience, they may choose a September afternoon or evening ZOOM or in-person hands-on combination that fits their needs. Zoom sessions and in-person locations have been confirmed. UW-Madison OAIC has been contacted to provide simultaneous interpretation in Spanish. Marketing materials are being

developed. Educators are developing curricula for their topics. Outcomes will be reported after the workshop series is completed.

- A fact sheet, an article, and a podcast were created for dairy farmers, where readers will increase their knowledge on cross-ventilated dairy barns and the benefits and drawbacks of the design. By doing so, farmers will better understand how this type of barn can benefit herd comfort, resulting in better milk production and profitability.
    - Cross-ventilated dairy barns, particularly low-profile cross-ventilated (LPCV) systems, are increasingly being recognized as a climate-smart solution for modern dairy operations. These barns offer a controlled environment that improves cow comfort, reduces heat stress, and promotes overall herd health and productivity. Unlike naturally ventilated barns, which rely heavily on variable outdoor conditions, cross-ventilated systems use large fans and strategically placed inlets to move air laterally across the barn. This consistent airflow enhances temperature regulation, removes excess moisture, and reduces airborne contaminants, resulting in more stable and welfare-friendly conditions for dairy cows. From a climate-smart agriculture standpoint, LPCV barns support environmental goals by helping to reduce the carbon intensity of milk production. Healthier, less-stressed cows tend to produce more milk with fewer resources, indirectly lowering methane emissions per unit of output. Additionally, the consistent barn environment enables more efficient manure handling and can contribute to improved nutrient management practices. While the upfront construction and operating costs for cross-ventilated barns can be significant, the long-term benefits in productivity, animal welfare, and climate resilience position them as a promising option in the transition to more sustainable dairy systems. As the dairy industry responds to climate pressures, integrating modern ventilation technologies with precision management offers a viable path forward. A series of fact sheets, articles, and audio podcasts was developed on various barn designs and ventilation schemes. Farmers will gain additional resources on cross-ventilation benefits and drawbacks. Farmers will better understand electricity use and barn design of a cross-ventilated barn.
- A Wisconsin Idea Collaboration for dairy producers and those who service dairy producers, where videos and fact sheets were produced on ventilation and cow comfort. Through this effort/program/activity, dairy producers will increase their knowledge of cow comfort and ventilation, therefore improving herd health, welfare, and profitability.
    - In modern dairy farming, the health and productivity of cows are directly impacted by their living environment. One of the key environmental factors is the quality of ventilation in the cow barn. Insufficient ventilation can lead to poor air quality, increased humidity, and the buildup of harmful gases such as ammonia and carbon dioxide. This not only compromises cow comfort but also increases the likelihood of respiratory infections, heat stress, and reduced milk production. To improve cow health and optimize profitability, it is essential to implement effective ventilation systems that provide fresh air, control humidity, and regulate temperature. Proper barn ventilation supports the overall well-being of the cows, reduces the risk of disease, enhances milk yield, and can lower veterinary costs. In turn, these improvements directly impact the farm's bottom line by increasing production efficiency and reducing losses associated with health-related issues. This situation highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to barn ventilation to improve both cow welfare and farm profitability. Creation of videos and fact sheets based on the needs expressed by stakeholders. Producers will implement cow heat abatement strategies in cattle housing to increase

animal comfort, herd health and welfare, and profitability. These efforts will also implement climate-smart strategies to improve milk production efficiency.

- A webinar, one session part of Badger Dairy Insight, for dairy farmers and dairy industry professionals, where participants learned about updates to Heifer synchronization protocols to promote increased heifer pregnancy rates.
    - Badger Dairy Insight is a monthly webinar offered to dairy farmers and dairy industry professionals around topics related to reproduction, nutrition, emerging technologies, and animal welfare to increase their knowledge around the latest University research. Then the reproduction and genetics workgroup provided speakers to talk on changes to heifer synchronization protocols. Attendees and those watching the recording of the presentations will have knowledge on changes to heifer synchronization protocols to increase breeding success.
- Creation of a data visualization tool for forage growers, crop consultants and livestock nutritionists in collaboration with local forage councils and agribusinesses. The goal is to provide timely, easy to use corn silage dry down data that these audiences can leverage to identify the optimum timing to harvest corn silage in their area which will produce forage more likely to meet animal nutrient requirements to support production.
    - Across the state, crops educators and consultants that support forage growers sample and report the whole plant moisture of corn for silage. Whole plant moisture is a key guiding factor for making corn silage harvest decisions. There was a need to update the tool used by Extension educators to share this data with our growers. In response to the need, we identified the important data that we need to collect from growers during the dry down events and created tools to allow for simple data collection at the dry down sites. With the help of our data scientist, a tool was created that provides this data, but also allows the user to manipulate the table and maps to see the information that is most relevant to their needs. Color coding data points provides an indication of the suitability for harvest of each data point, making it easy for stakeholders to visualize the data.
- Planning a September 2025 in-person late afternoon meeting hosted on a commercial beef operation and taught by livestock, and crop and soil educators. The goal is to increase cow-calf producers' understanding of heifer reproduction and fall forage management to improve their farm's economic viability. Total Reach: will be reported once registration numbers are known.
    - The Livestock Program Plan of Work objectives include leading multi-county cow-calf production in-person meetings. Beef programming evaluation data and producer surveys indicate that cow-calf producers value in-person sessions where scientifically peer-reviewed topics are taught that will help increase their bottom line. Stuttgen solicited a local beef producer and the North Central WI Cattlemen's Association to sponsor this twilight meeting near Stanley, WI, in September 2025. Livestock educators Stuttgen, Sterry, and Halfman, along with crop and soil educators Ohlrich and Clark, are developing the topics they will teach. Curriculum and marketing are underway. Outcomes will be reported after the meeting from the attendees' evaluation responses.

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FoodWIse

Mallory McGivern, FoodWIse Administrator
Michelle Van Krey, Healthy Communities Coordinator
Julia Perock, FoodWIse Educator

- Shared leadership in the Marathon County Hunger Coalition, where emphasis is placed on expanding healthy food access and developing new projects and partnerships that will empower Marathon County families through education and shared resources. The coalition's goal is to increase access to healthy foods in order to achieve health equity for all county residents.
- Nutrition Educator Julia, Healthy Communities Coordinator Michelle and FoodWIse Program Administrator Mallory worked in collaboration with The Neighbors' Place to provide relevant recipes to pantry guests based on Farm to Families food boxes from United Way Hunger Coalition. Food samples, like a Three Sisters Salad pictured right, were also provided for guests to help them understand how to use foods offered in the market.

Horticulture

Janell Wehr, Horticulture Educator

- An Integrated Pest Management (IPM)-based workshop for the general public where participants learned to identify insect damage, distinguish pests from beneficials, and understand life cycles. The program aimed to reduce pesticide misuse and support environmentally responsible pest control.
    - In Marathon County, residential pesticide misuse contributes to water quality concerns and pollinator decline. The Marathon County Stormwater Quality Management Plan calls for public education on sustainable pest management. Many residents lack the knowledge to identify pests or apply targeted control, making IPM outreach essential. A workshop grounded in Integrated Pest Management (IPM) taught the public how to connect plant damage to insect mouthparts, understand insect life cycles, and recognize that most insects are beneficial. This knowledge empowers participants to choose pest control strategies that are better timed, more targeted, and less harmful to pollinators and the environment. These efforts support local sustainability goals outlined in regional stormwater and environmental planning documents. As a result of the workshop, 100% of participants reported increased confidence in identifying insect life stages and using that knowledge to guide pest management decisions. All participants could distinguish between chewing and sucking insect damage and felt mostly prepared to protect beneficial insects. One participant noted they would "plan ahead instead of waiting for the damage to show up," reflecting a shift toward proactive, environmentally responsible pest management.
- A hands-on horticulture and mindfulness activity for 4-H youth where participants created kokedamas, explored plant biology and soil science, and learned about Japanese gardening traditions. The experience fostered creativity, cultural awareness, and stress reduction through mindful engagement with nature.

  - Youth in the region face rising stress levels and limited access to nature-based experiences that support mental well-being. The Marathon County LIFE Report highlights growing concerns around youth mental health and the need for positive, skill-building opportunities. Programs that combine hands-on learning, mindfulness, and cultural exploration can help young people build resilience and a stronger connection to the natural world. Youth enjoyed the hands-on experience of making kokedamas and learning about plants in a fun, relaxed setting. Many were excited to take their moss balls home and showed interest in caring for them. The program gave kids a chance to be creative, explore nature, and learn something new in a supportive environment.
- A hands-on gardening program for young children where participants created kokedamas, explored plant biology and soil science, and learned about Japanese gardening traditions. The activity supported early STEAM learning by encouraging observation, creativity, and basic scientific thinking through nature-based exploration.
  - Young children benefit from early exposure to hands-on activities that build curiosity and foundational skills in science, art, and problem-solving. Programs that combine nature, creativity, and simple science concepts help spark interest in STEAM learning from an early age. Children at the day camp took part in a hands-on gardening activity designed to spark curiosity and connect them with nature. Participants created kokedamas, learning how plants grow and what they need to stay healthy. The lesson introduced basic science ideas like how plants use water and light, along with a look at Japanese gardening traditions. Children used their senses to explore textures and smells, practiced fine motor skills while wrapping moss and twine, and joined in short mindfulness moments to help them slow down and focus. The activity encouraged curiosity, creativity, and early interest in science and art.
- A soil health program for the general public where participants learned core concepts like organic matter, pH, and nutrients to support better soil management and reduce pollution from chemical misuse.
  - Marathon County faces environmental and horticultural challenges, including nonpoint source pollution from residential chemical misuse. Regional planning documents highlight the need for public education on nutrient management and sustainable land use to protect water quality and adapt to climate change. In response to local concerns about soil health and chemical misuse, a soil health program was developed to teach residents about soil texture, pH, compost use, and nutrient management. Participants learned how to assess and improve their soil using compost, interpret fertilizer labels, and apply sustainable practices to protect water quality and support resilient gardens.
- A session for Marathon County youth, where participants learned about pollinators and beneficial insects. This effort was designed to increase youth understanding of pollinators and their role, promote environmental stewardship and conservation, and connect youth to their environment.
  - Declining pollinator populations pose a significant threat to biodiversity, food security, and ecosystem health. Early education on pollinators and beneficial insects is critical to fostering environmental stewardship among youth. Engaging young learners in hands-on, science-based programming helps build awareness of pollinators' ecological roles and strengthens connections to the natural environment. Youth in Marathon County were engaged through hands-on activities exploring pollinators and beneficial insects. Interactive games, food-based discussions, and guided reflection helped connect ecological concepts to real-world impacts, fostering environmental

awareness and stewardship. Youth gained awareness of pollinators' roles in ecosystems and food systems through interactive learning. The program fostered curiosity and encouraged actions that support biodiversity and sustainable practices.

- A diagnostic service for the general public, where Marathon and Wood County residents' horticultural inquiries are answered through evidence-based resources. This effort is designed to reduce pollution through horticultural product (pesticides and fertilizers) misuse.

Natural Resources

Kris Tiles, NRI Program Manager
Anna James, Regional Natural Resources Educator
Jen McNelly, Regional Natural Resources Groundwater Educator

- A study to monitor how land use changes effect nitrate concentrations in groundwater, and to foster environmental awareness and stewardship amongst school aged children. Results from this study will help city and school administrators evaluate the impacts of the land use changes.
    - Abbotsford is located in an area of north central Wisconsin where groundwater quantity is limited to a thin shallow aquifer that is impacted with nitrates. One of the city's well fields is located on school property. The land use was changed from row crops to restored prairie and school forest in an attempt to improve groundwater quality. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) contracted with WGNHS to evaluate groundwater quality and establish a conceptual model for groundwater flow around the wellfield and to engage Abbotsford schools in an attempt to incorporate groundwater education into the district's curriculum. WGNHS subcontracted the well drilling and worked with Abbotsford schools to have students visit the drilling site and to make observations of the aquifer material. In May and September 2025, WGNHS will provide additional training and material support (a water quality meter, sampling supplies, etc.) to support the school taking over long term monitoring at the site. WGNHS will provide ongoing technical support for the analysis and interpretation of the results.
- A project for Wisconsin woodland owners where they will work with a forester to get a Forest Stewardship Plan. Through this program, woodland owners will receive a plan that will allow them to identify goals for their property, plan for the future of their land, and implement management activities. Total Reach: 29 Cooperating Foresters have joined the project to write Forest Stewardship Plan 45 Woodland Owners have been connected with Forester to get a plan 10 Forest Stewardship Plans completed 541 New Forested Acres in a Forest Stewardship Plan
    - Wisconsin has made great strides in private forest landowner engagement, more than 21,000 new landowners have received a property visit from a professional forester since 2018. These landowners have received personalized information about their property and are poised to act in their woods. The cost of getting a Forest Stewardship Plan can be prohibitive for some woodland owners, but those same plans are commonly required to participate in cost-share programs that help pay for woodland management activities. We created the Wisconsin Stewardship Plan Project (WSPP) to help Wisconsin landowners take the next step by making it possible for them to get a Forest Stewardship plan for their woodlands. WSPP created a network of private foresters that will write

plans across the state. The Wisconsin DNR received a grant so that the project could pay the private foresters for the plans they write. When an eligible woodland owner signs up, the project will connect them with a private forester that can write a Stewardship Plan in their area. The woodland owner works with the private forester to identify goals for their woodlands and strategies to reach goals, and the process ends with the landowner having a Forest Stewardship Plan. Targeted outreach to woodland owners that have done a walkthrough with their DNR forester, but do not have a management plan, is planned for the future to help the project continue to grow. Outreach will include emailing information about the program and/or a mailing. We will also connect with partner organizations to help us proliferate information about the project in their network. The Wisconsin Stewardship Plan Project will increase the number of landowners who have a Forest Stewardship Plan for their property. In 2024, 10 landowners have received a new plan, covering 541 acres of woodland in Wisconsin. Further this will increase the number of woodland owners that have the required management plan to apply for cost share programs that can financially help with management activities. Our project removes the financial barrier of getting a Forest Stewardship Plan for some landowner's by using grant funding to pay for the plans. UW Extension Forestry will continue to engage and provide resources for woodland owners after they get a Forest Stewardship Plan so participants feel better prepared to implement their plan. The project is also employing private foresters across the state by providing plan writing opportunities. The hope is that culmination of this effort will increase forest health across the state.

Additional Extension Outreach Programming Occurring in Marathon County

- Planning for a spreadsheet tool for dairy producers and consultants. The goal is to help producers understand the value of managing inventory and to be able to use the spreadsheet to account for loss and varying qualities of feed, and storage methods so that they can better plan and manage feed inventories. Feed is the largest expense on a dairy farm, accounting for about half of all input costs.
    - Older tools developed for feed inventory management focused heavily on storage in tower silos. Today many different storage systems including bunkers, piles, balage and dry hay may be utilized. A new tool needs to be developed. Currently a tool developed by the beef program is the best we have available and it needs to be updated for dairy specific considerations. A team of dairy program members has convened to update old publications and spreadsheets and to review similar tools developed by the livestock team. The spreadsheet including many reference tables will become a resource on the dairy program website.
- An article in print and on the internet for a general farm audience, which highlighted the many advances in grazing systems that have made it more productive and worth the consideration of producers as a sound economical way to manage livestock production systems. Total Reach: The Wisconsin Agriculturist has a circulation of 22,000 with multiple members per household in the distribution. The web version is available to a wider audience over an extended period of time and is still having new views after the print publication.

- As livestock operations become larger and more specialized many producers are unaware of the many advantages grazing offers for good environmental stewardship, economical production and quality of life for producers. It is advantageous to partner with a farm paper to remind people to consider the benefits of grazing as a viable alternative production system for many different types of farms. Partnering with the Wisconsin Agriculturist, a member of the Farm Progress group of publications found in many states, I was able to highlight how many stereotypes about grazing are incorrect. Grazing can be often be more profitable per head than confinement systems with a little management applying modern production practices to increase productivity as measured by animal performance and pasture yield. Working with Fran O'Leary, editor of the Wisconsin Agriculturist, we produced an article that not only appeared in the May-June issue of their print magazine but is available on the website for an extended period of the informa- Farm Progress website, under the livestock and grazing selection key.

- Shared leadership in the Eat Right Be Fit coalition in Clark County, where emphasis is placed on the health and safety of Clark County families through increased food access, education and shared resources. The coalition's goal is to develop new projects and partnerships that will advance health equity in Clark County.
- Shared leadership in the Giving Gardens committee of Partners HP, where emphasis is placed on promoting and supporting efforts to maintain community gardens, improve food security, and provide educational programming in Portage County
- A series of StrongBodies strength training sessions in partnership with Berkshire At The Grove, where older adults also receive nutrition and health education. Participants engage in regular strength training exercises to improve muscle strength, balance, and flexibility so they can stay healthy and socially connected.

Upcoming Programs

- **4-H Programming** – Information at marathon.extension.wisc.edu/projects/programs/
- **Horticultural Programs** – Information at https://marathon.extension.wisc.edu/horticulture/programs/

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