



## Soil Health Hero Awards

### 2025 Selection Committee



#### 1. Dylan Arnette

MAEAP Verifier – Michigan Dept. of Agriculture & Rural Development

Dylan Arnett is a MAEAP Verifier. He currently verifies the following counties: Arenac, Bay, Clare, Gladwin, Gratiot, Huron, Isabella, Lake, Mecosta, Midland, Montcalm, Osceola, Saginaw, Sanilac, St. Clair, and Tuscola. Dylan attended Michigan State University and received a Bachelor of Science in Crop and Soil Science with a minor in Technology Systems (GIS) and Environmental Studies. He

grew up in Gratiot County, where he still helps operate his family's large cash crop farm with his father.



#### 2. Wayne Bierlein

Soil Health Hero, Conservation Legacy – Farming in Tuscola County

Wayne is a former Soil Health Hero having won the Conservation Legacy award for 2023. He is a row crop famer in Tuscola County. His farm is true no-till on all 1500-ish acres also utilizes cover crops to their greatest ability. He has also begun "planting green" over the last few years, further adding to his sustainability efforts. Wayne is an advocate for conservation tries to take a

larger role in helping communicate why sustainability is important. In the past his farm has hosted a sustainability field day and helps work with neighbors on sustainability efforts. Wayne also serves on the advisory board of the Reese FFA Chapter.



#### 3. Monica Jean

Field Crops Educator – MSU Extension  
PhD Student- [Soil Health and Ecosystem Ecology Lab](#)

Monica serves central lower Michigan with an emphasis on the Saginaw Bay watershed region. Her position covers a large variety of crop production including corn, soybean, edible dry beans, potato and integrated crop and livestock systems. Monica is involved in cover crop, soil health, nutrient

management, and cropping system research projects. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Soil Science. She enjoys conducting practical, on-farm research and working with farmers to improve the weather resilience of their farms. Monica is the Michigan chair for the Midwest Cover Crop Council and the North Central Climate Collaborative.



#### 4. Kristin Poley

Director of Research and Agronomy – Michigan Corn Growers Association

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Kristin Poley joined the Corn Marketing Program of Michigan (CMPM) in 2019 as research manager, where she is responsible for managing CMPM's grant research portfolio. She is also the coordinator for the Great Lakes Crop Summit and is involved in climate and sustainability initiatives. Kristin grew up in Sturgis, Michigan. She attended Michigan State University and graduated with a B.S. in fisheries and wildlife biology and an M.S. in entomology. From there

Kristin joined the applied nematology staff at MSU where she studied nematode management and soil health. She is also a certified crop advisor. Kristin now resides in St. Johns, Michigan with her husband, Nathan, on a few acres raising chickens, geese, and ducks.



#### 5. Ben Thelen

District Conservationist (Genesee County) – USDA-NRCS

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Ben Thelen has worked for the Natural Resources Conservation Service for over 20 years. He is currently the District Conservationist for the Flint Field Office. He previously worked in the Saginaw, Kimball, Caro and Ithaca Field Offices. Ben attended Michigan State University and has a degree in Environmental Soil Science.



#### 6. Tess Van Gorder

Conservation and Regulatory Relations Specialist – Michigan Farm Bureau

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Tess Van Gorder is a Conservation and Regulatory Relations Specialist at Michigan Farm Bureau. She collaborates with governmental and non-governmental organizations on opportunities related to environmental research, stewardship, and conservation on farms. Tess provides technical expertise on topics including groundwater discharge permitting, carbon and

ecosystem services credits, and water quality and supports the Michigan Manure Hauler Certification Program – a voluntary program for anyone who hauls and/or applies manure. Tess earned a BA in Environmental Policy from the University of Michigan and previously worked at ENGIE Insight, an energy and sustainability management firm out of St. Paul, Minnesota on energy procurement.



## 7. Lisa Woodke

Director of Sustainability – Star of The West Milling Company

Lisa joined Star of the West in 2019 as sustainability director. Lisa is a graduate of Michigan State University College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. During her years with Star of the West, she has led several projects, including the installation of solar panels at the company's Richville location; the addition of a pollinator strip at the company's Emmett location; the launch of Airly carbon crackers and the Frankenmuth goat riverbank project. She also has received her Sustainability Specialty designation after receiving her Certified

Crop Advisor certificate for the state of Michigan. In her spare time, Lisa also volunteers for many local groups and organizations.



## 8. Paul Gross

MSU Extension (Retired), Adjunct Professor of Agriculture - Mid-Michigan Community College

Paul recently retired after a 30 plus year career as an Educator with Michigan State University Extension, where he specialized in Field Crops, Cover Crops, Water Quality, and Soil Health. His dedication to sustainable agriculture and improving farming practices made a significant impact on the communities he served. Following his retirement, Paul continues to share his expertise as an

Adjunct Faculty member in Agriculture at Mid-Michigan College. He is passionate about supporting small and beginning farmers, focusing on their success in production, business development, and land access.



## 9. Megan DeLeeuw

Soil, Water, & Climate Section Manager – Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Bureau of Environment and Sustainability

Megan serves as MDARD's Soil, Water, and Climate Section Manager. She is a first-generation farmer with more than 17 years of experience in regenerative agriculture, program development, and organizational management. Megan was the executive director of the Washtenaw County Conservation District for six years. Prior to this, Megan established and managed her own certified organic farm and served as an AmeriCorps member and farmer with the

Greening of Detroit. Megan holds a B.S. in Philosophy and Political Science, an MBA with a focus in Nonprofit Management, and is a graduate of Michigan State University's (MSU) Organic Farmer Training Program. She resides on her farm in Sharon Township with her husband and two terriers, growing and cooking food, reading, embarking on motorcycle adventures, and exploring the world.



## 10. Elizabeth H. Schultheis

Education & Outreach Coordinator – Kellogg Biological Station's Long Term Ecological Research Program

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Liz directs the Kellogg Biological Station's Long Term Ecological Research program's community engagement, education, and communications initiatives. She actively seeks opportunities to educate and dialogue with professional stakeholder groups including farmers, agricultural professionals, natural resource managers, and educators about the ecology of agricultural landscapes. Throughout the year the

KBS LTER offers workshops, tours, and educational materials. As a broadly trained plant biologist, ecologist, and discipline-based education researcher, Elizabeth uses her scientific and communication skills to help scientists share their stories and research with broad audiences to promote a passion for science and data literacy in the next generation.