

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

Amy Boelk, 4-H Program Educator

- Planning for a multi-county Winter Leadership Camp experience for youth ages 13 and above.
- Planning and facilitation of the club charter process for all Portage County clubs
- Supervision of a student intern that will be working with Portage County extension, focused in the area of 4-H, youth development and family engagement through the end of December
- Planning for transition of the Portage County Market Animal Project (a current 4-H chartered group) to develop a 501c3 for their animal auction at the annual fair in order to better streamline the work their group is doing for youth livestock education versus animal auction and facility/capital improvements on the fairground. The goal is to transition the auction and financial elements of their group to a 501c3 non profit, so that the remaining 4-H livestock group can focus on more robust educational outcomes for all youth in the county, not just those auctioning animals at the Rosholt Fair. Total Reach: 15 adult volunteers, 50+ youth in livestock-related project
- Development of study materials including several study sessions for 3 Portage county youth teams for the 2025 State Poultry Quiz Bowl taking place at the International Poultry Show at Portage, WI including attendance at the event where 2 junior teams placed in the top 3 and our senior team won the state championship title to qualify for nationals
- Hosting of a 4-H Leaders Association banquet and 4-H Youth Awards ceremony including awards, decorations, speech writing, acknowledgements and more youth public speaking training, and facility setup
- Support and facilitation of a virtual school-based 4-H club at the Tomorrow River Community Virtual Charter School where families will participate in a club-based, family focused activities that support experiential learning during open class periods for youth in PK-8th grade
- Support and facilitation of a youth-led 4-H club at Central Sands High School including training of officers, meeting facilitation and ongoing support to build leadership capacity and career readiness in youth
- Developed an ongoing incentive program for youth participation and engagement in local, county, state and national 4-H activities to further motivate youth to attend and learn about a wide-variety of experiential learning and career and college-based topics

Agriculture & Ag Related Natural Resources

Additional work being conducted in Portage County

- A virtual brown bag discussion was held for Wisconsin cranberry growers, where new information was shared about blunt nosed leafhoppers, new research on spring frost tolerance was shared, and color development at and during harvest was discussed. Through this session, growers have better research-backed information with which to make harvest color decisions. They are also able to use new information to manage frost tolerance in new hybrids. They also can manage the blunt nosed leafhopper better--important as the BNLH transmits an incurable disease. - *Allison Jonjak, Cranberry Outreach Specialist, Amaya Atucha, Fruit Crop Production Specialist*
- A compendium was compiled of all current UW and Wisconsin cranberry research, and statistical analysis was performed. This was shared with Wisconsin cranberry growers an in particular the Wisconsin Cranberry Board, which provides grower-supported funding for research projects. A complete understanding of ongoing research helps grower-supported funds allocate support to high-leverage, critical research projects. - *Allison Jonjak, Cranberry Outreach Specialist*
- A virtual brown bag seminar for Wisconsin cranberry growers will be held, where current research updates will be presented on health topics and cranberry chewing gum, stem gall canker, and current pollinator tracking research. Through this seminar, growers will learn how to protect their marshes against the stem gall disease, and understand how to assess foraging patterns of pollinators on their marshes. Both of these will improve yields and reduce input costs. - *Allison Jonjak, Cranberry Outreach Specialist*
- Planning for a bilingual agricultural conference for Hmong farmers in collaboration with local agencies and educators. The goal is to provide education on sustainable farming, business development, and pest management, so that participants can improve farm profitability, adopt resilient practices, and strengthen community connections. - *Multiple Educators, Janell Wehr, Addison Vang, Emilee Gaulke, Gaonou Thao, Melissa Ohlrich, Mia Ljung, Rue Genger, Stephanie Plaster, & Trisha Wagner*
- In-person Planning Emergency Livestock Transportation Response (PELTR) hybrid workshops for and in collaboration with area and statewide emergency response personnel. The goal of PELTR is to maintain an effective emergency response that protects producer/livestock owners' and Wisconsin's agricultural economic viability. - *Multiple Educators, Adam Hartfield, Bill Halfman, Heather Schlesser, & Sandy Stuttgen*



A farmer feature article highlighting how one of our demonstration farmers is transforming low-yield acres into productive forage and conservation buffers using precision technology and partnerships. The effort was designed to support local learning amongst farmers by featuring how a local producer is implementing soil health practices on his land and highlight the Upper Fox-Wolf Demonstration Farm Network as a resource for farmers. Total Reach: Information not available yet. However, our expected reach, based on past performance of these feature articles in the Basin Buzz newsletter and social media posts is about 3,700 people total. - *Maranda Miller, Regional Natural Resources Ed*



A series of photos exploring soil health practices and principles visible during harvest season, such as cover crops, continual living roots, and integrating livestock. Plus, accompanying educational text explaining the soil health principles behind these practices, how local farmers are applying them, and highlighting the farm and location. This ongoing effort was made to show real-world examples of soil health in action during harvest and inspire farmers to adopt these practices. The effort was designed to support improved soil health and water quality in the Great Lakes Basin. Total Reach: 6 posts so far, which have reached 2,677 people. - *Maranda Miller, Regional Natural Resources Educator*



Facilitation of quarterly meetings of the Central Sands Groundwater County Collaborative, where representatives from Wood, Waushara, Marquette, Portage, Juneau, and Adams Counties Health and Land and Water Conservation Department and County Board Supervisors meet to discuss groundwater issues and concerns and management actions, plan events, update each other on work being done and identify new collaborations for future work and projects in the Central Sands Region of Wisconsin. - *Jen Mcnelly, Wood County Natural Resources Groundwater Educator*



A series of meetings for conservation and water professionals from six counties in the Wisconsin central sands to learn about the groundwater nitrate flow model created by the Wisconsin Geological and Natural History Survey. The first meeting was to introduce the model and solicit feedback on potential improvements. The second meeting was to provide guidance on the use of the model and answer any questions that the Counties might have. - *Jen Mcnelly, Wood County Natural Resources Groundwater Educator, & David Hart, Hydrogeologist*



A study to better understand nitrate occurrence in the streams of the central sands and link that occurrence to land use. Results of this study will help county and regional planners, academic researchers, and regulatory agencies in making informed decisions on groundwater quantity and quality. - *David Hart, Hydrogeologist*



Denotes educational or planning efforts that work toward improving water quality in Portage County, Central Wisconsin, and the State as whole. While these efforts are highlighted in this report, there is more work being done by Extension to address water quality concerns outside of what is here. For more information about these efforts, or other efforts Extension has undertaken regarding water quality, please reach out to our office.

Community & Economic Development

Katie Livernash, Community Development Educator

- Facilitating a series of meetings with the various public, private, and government service providers in Portage County that touch the continuum of housing services, where they explore what collaboration around housing efforts looks like. The purpose is to maximize communication and potential action between organizations, so that housing access and affordability is improved. Total Reach: 25 attendees per meeting.

November-December 2025 Activity Report

- Extension is serving on the Zoning Ordinance Subcommittee to support Portage County as they undertake a comprehensive rewrite of their Zoning Ordinance. The goal of the rewritten code is that it will better reflect current land use practices, community values, and future growth objectives.
- A kick-off meeting for the Central Wisconsin Entrepreneurship Coalition (CWEC), where economic developers, practitioners, and local government staff brainstormed and developed a shared mission, mapped resources, and identified priorities of focus for the coalition. Through this effort, CWEC aims to build a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem with resources, capital, and collaboration for growth within the Central Wisconsin Region.
- Planning for a regional rural housing summit for April 15th, 2026, hosted in Stevens Point in collaboration with state and regional CDI educators, and local, regional, and state housing partners. The goal is to engage developers, local government, and housing practitioners around rural housing solutions and best practices in order to increase affordable workforce housing and local economies in their area.
- A series of strategic planning sessions with the Stevens Point Fire Department to identify and prioritize goals and initiatives as a department over the next 5 years. Through this effort, the Fire Department updated their mission, reaffirmed their vision and values, and set strategic priorities as a department for the next 5 years. Overall, the values, goals, and objectives are aligned across the department, overall strengthening the department's sustainability and growth to effectively serve Portage County residents. Total Reach: 14 plan committee members

Additional Community, Natural Resources & Economic Development work being conducted in Portage County

- A nine-month program (Local Government Leadership Academy) offered statewide for elected officials, department heads, directors, managers, and other local government leaders where they develop effective leadership skills, including relationship-building, communication, decision-making, and vision. The purpose of this program is to help local government leaders develop professionally while also improving the overall function of their local government, thus increasing their capacity to provide quality services. Total Reach: 18 participants working in 10 different counties or communities. *Elizabeth Mccrank, Community Leadership Specialist, Amber Wichowsky, Extension Specialist, Organizational & Leadership Development, Annie Jones, Organizational Development & Tribal Nations Specialist, Daniel Foth, Senior Outreach Specialist, Eric Olson, Director, Extension Lakes, Lake Specialist, Jessica Beckendorf, Extension Broadband Partnerships Specialist, Michelle Grimm, Senior Community Development Extension Educator.*

Human Development and Relationships

Additional Human Development and Relationships work being conducted in Portage County

- A professional development training for childcare providers, where participants explored the importance of play-based approaches and learned strategies to implement them in their classrooms. Through this effort, educators reported increased confidence in planning meaningful play experiences and supporting children's growth. Total Reach: 12 childcare providers- *Alicia Utke-Becher, Waupaca County Human Development & Relationships Educator*

Health & Well-Being

Additional Health & Well-Being work being conducted in Portage County

- Over the past year, Covering Wisconsin has coordinated and overseen 12 regional- and population-focused coalitions in which Wisconsin professionals interested or directly involved in health insurance enrollment gather to discuss changes to health coverage policy, share outreach and educational strategies, receive free professional trainings, and offer ideas for relevant consumer resource messaging and design. Through our efforts, a total of 88 coalition meetings were held, attracting 1,649 attendees, to focus on the health coverage issues affecting Wisconsin residents, especially immigrants, Spanish-speaking residents, Hmong residents, and those located in Central, East Central, Milwaukee, Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest, and Western regions. Total Reach: Total Reach over previous 12 months: 12 enrollment network coalitions facilitated 88 coalition meetings held 1,649 people attended 2,325 people were reached through coalition informational emails sent. - *Caroline Gomez-Tom, Enrollment Network & Accessibility Manager Milwaukee County, Allison Espeseth, Outreach Program Director*
- Navigator enrollment assistance provided to anyone in Wisconsin, where 97,013 consumers were assisted with health insurance questions or enrollment. Through this effort, our Navigators completed 4,041 qualified health plan enrollments through the federal Health Insurance Marketplace and assisted 5,615 consumers with Medicaid, resulting in widespread access to health care and improved health outcomes. - *Adam Vanspankeren, Outreach Program Manager, Allison Espeseth, Outreach Program Director & Elizabeth Rothe, Outreach Program Coordinator*

Upcoming Events

- Understanding AI: A Forum for Local Governments. Learn more and receive a registration notification here: extension.wisc.edu/aiforums
 - Thursday, March 5th 8:00 - 3:30, Wisconsin Dells at the Kalahari Resort
 - Tuesday, March 17th 8:00 - 3:30, Oshkosh at the Marriott Waterfront Hotel & Convention Center
 - Wednesday, March 18th 8:00 - 3:30, Eau Claire at the Lismore Hotel
 - Thursday, March 26th 8:00 - 3:30, Lac du Flambeau at the Lake of the Torches Resort