

GROWING TOGETHER CONFERENCE



Friday, February 28

10:00 a.m. Registration Opens

11:00 a.m. Young Farmer and Promotion & Education Chair Luncheon

11:30 a.m. Collegiate member luncheon

1:00 p.m. Tours Depart

A Northern Exploration of Wine, Dairy, and Fruit Research

This tour will depart north to three stops that offer a blend of agriculture, craft beverages, and innovation.

Country Dairy is a fourth-generation family farm that has become an agro-tourism and educational destination. Their farm milks 1200 cows and bottles 70,000 gallons of milk per week. They sell their milk, cheese, butter and ice cream in their retail store and restaurant and employ 125 people.

Fox Barn Winery has been a part of the farming community for five generations. The business' foundation is the care of the 2000 acres of land that is 75 percent fruit with the remaining land growing asparagus and wood lots managed by a forester. The Farm Market was introduced in 2005 and the Winery added in 2008.

West Michigan Research Station is a community-based, non-profit research station dedicated to agricultural research for the neighboring communities of Oceana, Newaygo, and Mason Communities. Situated on 86 acres of farmland, the station partners with stakeholder groups and provides support to farmers with training, research, community space, and equipment.

Please bring a jacket, hat, and gloves as some of this tour will require walking outdoors.

Crops, Critters, and Beverages

Buckle up for this tour into the innovative practices and sustainable methods that drive modern agriculture. Whether you are an industry professional, entrepreneur, or simply just curious, this tour will take your understanding of the agricultural sector to the next level!

Bring your crew to **Spring Meadows Nursery**, where you'll explore the fascinating world of plant genetics and shrub liners. Find how innovative breeding techniques lead to diverse and resilient liners, service, and plant varieties.

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At **Critter Barn** there is an elite hands-on agricultural education center with real farm experience. Engage with a variety of farm animals and learn about roles in agriculture. Through interactive exhibits and guided talks, you'll gain insights into Critter Barn's inspirational practices.

St. Steve's Farm-Crafted Beverages is where the art of farm-crafted beverages comes to life. Here, you can learn about the selection of hand-crafted sodas, sparkling waters, cordials and teas made locally from their farm and the production process of St. Steve's Farm-Crafted Beverages.

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Working Farms Double as Agricultural Classrooms

Join us for an afternoon exploring two unique stops that celebrate agricultural heritage, modernization, and consumer experience.

Robinette's Apple Haus and Winery, which started in 1911 as a peach farm, is now a sixth-generation, year-round agrotourism staple right outside of Grand Rapids. Learn more about their retail-marketing, apple production, and innovative direct-to-consumer strategies.

Dairy Discovery is a non-profit educational organization that helps tell the story of modern dairy farming through programs, tours, and camps, as well as hosting educational open houses events. Dairy Discovery was founded by Annie Link of **Swisslane Farms**, after many years of welcoming classrooms on their farm to learn where their food comes from.

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Barn Quilt Making & Coopersville Farm Museum

At **Coopersville Farm Museum** you have the chance to not only learn about techniques behind creating your own barn quilt, but the historical and now direct-to-consumer significance of barn quilts to Michigan.

Each participant will paint and take home their own 2 ft. by 2 ft. wooden barn quilt.

While you wait for your barn quilt to dry, explore the Coopersville Farm Museum, a non-profit organization dedicated to honoring farming and rural life! This experience brings you an enjoyable time and the souvenir of your very own barn or wood quilt!

There will be a \$40 fee for each participant to cover the barn quilt making supplies and class.

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Farm Safety

Join Jonathen Degen from **Rural Rescue** for an interactive and immersive, 2.5 hr experience at Muskegon Fire Department where you will have the opportunity to...

- See a live skid loader rollover extrication and rescue demonstration,
- Participate in a hands-on major bleeding demonstration,
- Receive training on wet and dry chemical decontamination, and
- Learn more about heat and cold environmental emergencies.

The demonstrations will take place partially outdoors. Attendees should wear warm winter gear.

After the training, the group will head to **Pidgeon Hill Brewing Company** for a tour and to learn about the craft beverage industry.

Service and Cocktails

What better way to learn the significance of your community involvement and knowledge than to get real-world observation into community service. This experience will begin with a volunteer opportunity with Kids Food Basket of Muskegon and then the group will participate in a grand tour of a distillery and a cocktail making class at **Wonderland Distilling!** *Must be 21+ to register for the distillery tour/class.*

Shop and Explore

Spend your tour time exploring Downtown Muskegon where history meets modern charm. Visit an array of unique shops and one of the many local museums and historical sites:

Muskegon Museum of Art (11:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.)

Muskegon Musuem of History & Science (10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.)

The Frauenthal Center (11:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.)

Hackley and Hume Historic Site (10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.)

Scolnik House of the Depression Era (10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.)

Fire Barn Museum (10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.)

Downtown Shopping

This perfect blend of shopping, culture, and history is sure to make for an unforgettable adventure.

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6:00 p.m. Tour Dinners throughout downtown Muskegon

Saturday, March 1

7:00 a.m. Registration opens

7:45 a.m. Breakfast and Program

Join us to kick off a day of learning, networking, and recognition! Rub the sleep from your eyes and head to breakfast early to get a great seat. We're going to overview the program, introduce some key people and organizations who make this conference possible and highlight leaders of our organization for now and the future.

9:30 a.m. District collaboration meetings

- District 1 - **Ballroom D**
- District 2 - **A-1**
- District 3 - **White Lake**
- District 4 - **Mona Lake**
- District 5 - **A-2**
- District 6 - **Twin Lake**
- District 7 - **A-3**
- District 8 - **Ballroom BC**
- District 9 - **Fox Lake**
- District 10 - **Wolf Lake**
- District 11 - **Muskegon Lake**
- District 12 - **Duck Lake**

10:30 a.m. Break

10:45 a.m. 45-minute breakouts

Every Acre Counts: Maximizing Your Farm's Profitability

Seth Earl, U.S. Department of Agriculture District Conservationist and Mason County Farm Bureau President

VanDyk Center A-1

Dive deep into total farm profit by utilizing non-farmed acres for supplemental revenue. Learn how government programs can boost bottom-line profitability and cost-assistance for adopting on-farm technology.

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Foundational Elements of Farm Financing (tiered)

Jennifer Whitford and Courtney Ross, GreenStone Farm Credit Services **VanDyk Center A-2**

Join us for a basic introduction to farm finance and how it applies to your operation. Whether starting your own farm or expanding your current business, this is the session for you!

Bringing Accurate Ag Books Alive

Michelle Blodgett, Michigan Ag in the Classroom Manager; Alexis Feldpausch, MAITC Specialist; and Katie Blashill, St. Clair County FB **VanDyk Center A-3**

Explore ag-accurate books, complementing lesson ideas and hands-on activities to bring agriculture to life for your K-5 students. Topics include pollinators, school gardens, poultry and eggs, dairy and more. We will also discuss tactics for connecting with schools in your community.

Understanding Culture, Access and Belonging in Agriculture

Dr. Quentin Tyler, MSU Extension Director; Dr. Antomia Farrell, MSU College of Ag and Natural Resources Office of Culture, Access and Belonging Director; and Beth Stuever, MSU Extension Director of Public Affairs

Delta Hotel Muskegon Lake

Equitable and inclusive communication is key to effectively addressing contemporary challenges requiring your leadership. This session offers a fresh perspective on culture, access and belonging, including best practices and an opportunity to learn and grow through scenarios similar to what leaders nationwide are experiencing.

Celebrate Your Farm's Legacy: Methods for Preserving and Honoring Your Farm Family Story

Emily Klingbeil, Green Meadow Farms **Delta Hotel Mona Lake**

Learn how Michigan's centennial farm families tell their story and document their farms' history. Hear how to get involved in local history initiatives, connect with your community and preserve your older farm buildings. Bring your farm's history to life and celebrate its place in your community!

Equipment Loss Prevention: Safety and Preventative Maintenance (tiered)

Tom Piepkow, FB Insurance Risk & Safety Management Representative **Delta Hotel Twin Lake**

Explore crucial strategies for farm safety and preventative maintenance. Reduce losses in equipment like combines, choppers, skid steers and loaders. Equip yourself with insights for protecting your resources and ensuring a safer, more productive harvest.

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Planning and Zoning's Impact on Your Community (repeats)

Ryan Coffey Hoag, MSU Extension Newaygo County Land Use Educator **Delta Hotel White Lake**

Learn about the process and importance of planning and zoning decisions in local communities. Attendees will then apply these principles in short, hands-on exercises that mimic participation in the process, ending with practical options and encouragement to engage in and lead local policy.

Crop and Soil Management

VanDyk Ballroom D

Content coming soon.

11:30 a.m. Lunch and Program

Join Dr. Trey Malone, Boehlje Endowed Chair for Managerial Economics in Agribusiness at Purdue University, as he explores the future of Michigan farming. Drawing on his expertise in agribusiness entrepreneurship and agri-food supply chains, Dr. Malone will examine the trends shaping agriculture today and those poised to define the next 15 years. With insights backed by over 60 published research articles and funding from organizations like the National Science Foundation and USDA, this keynote will uncover the exciting innovations, challenges, and opportunities awaiting Michigan farmers in 2040. Don't miss this forward-looking discussion about the future of agriculture.

1:15 p.m. 45-minute breakouts (some repeat)

Necropsy Philosophy: Getting the Most Out of Death

Dodd Sledge, DVM, PhD, DACVP, MSU Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory **VanDyk Center A-1**

Veterinarians and farmers know death is part of life — and an opportunity to investigate what diseases may have been present in life. Necropsies are powerful tools to help farmers confront and manage disease within herds or evaluate how to improve animal care. Still, necropsies have limitations. This session will address why a necropsy may be recommended, what you should and shouldn't expect to learn, and the role veterinarians play in interpreting and using the information necropsies provide.

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Understanding Your Financial Metrics (tiered)

Jennifer Whitford and Courtney Ross, GreenStone Farm Credit Services **VanDyk Center A-2**

Join us for a more in-depth look at farm financing. In this session we will focus on breaking down financial statements, generating ratios and learning why they are important.

Community Connections with Agriculture

Alysa Sanford and Tiffany Howell, MFB State Promotion & Education Committee **VanDyk Center A-3**

Explore innovative ways to connect with your community and foster a deeper appreciation for agriculture. County Farm Bureaus significantly enhanced their outreach efforts this year, forging stronger connections with local consumers. Delve into these successful projects, harvest your peers' valuable insights, and learn how to adapt these initiatives to boost your own community engagement!

When They Marry You for Your Benefits, and Not Just Health Insurance

Cathy McCune, Isabella County FB President **Delta Hotel Muskegon Lake**

Explore the unique and vital roles farm spouses play in the farm's success and sustainability. We'll discuss balancing family life with farm responsibilities, managing the unexpected, and being the right support to keep the operation running smoothly. We'll share experiences, strategies and a few laughs about the challenges and rewards of being a true partner in life and business.

Diversify Farm Profits with Agritourism

Nicole Zaagman, Parkside Farm and Kent County FB Board Member **Delta Hotel Mona Lake**

Agritourism was a foreign concept when Parkside Farm began in 2021, but in just three years it's evolved into an eight-acre ag destination! Learn ways to diversify your farm profits with offerings such as overnight stays, ag education, farm markets and tours. Nicole will share her best practices and inspire participants to take risks, set goals and persevere to achieve new prosperity through agritourism.

Breaking Down your Farm's Emergency Action Plan (tiered)

Tom Piepkow, FB Insurance Risk & Safety Management Representative **Delta Hotel Twin Lake**

Create an effective Emergency Action Plan (EAP) for your farm. Dive deeper into essential elements including emergency contacts, accurate location identification and implementing visual aids to improve employee safety. Learn how to prepare your team for a range of unexpected emergencies and promote a safeguard mindset for your workplace.

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Learn about the process and importance of planning and zoning decisions in local communities. Attendees will then apply these principles in short, hands-on exercises that mimic participation in the process, ending with practical options and encouragement to engage in and lead local policy.

Taming the Bullwhip: Navigating Uncertainty in Agricultural Supply Chains

Trey Malone, Purdue Univ. Boehlje Endowed Chair for Managerial Economics in Agribusiness **VanDyk Ballroom D**

The "bullwhip effect" describes how small changes in consumer demand can create ripples — and even shocks — throughout the agricultural supply chain. In this interactive workshop, we'll explore the critical importance of understanding your end user, the role of international supply chains, and how input pricing affects your operation. Learn strategies to identify supply chain vulnerabilities, diversify sourcing, and align your business with customer needs.

Whether you're a farmer or an agribusiness professional, this session will help you anticipate challenges, make informed decisions, and build a more resilient operation

2:00 p.m. Break

2:30 p.m. 30-minute roundtable breakouts

Roundtable discussions allow for unstructured, open dialogue with other member peers on topics important to you all.

From Farm to Market: The Value-Added Advantage **VanDyk Center A-1**

Investigate how to enhance your products — whether through processing, packaging or branding — to capture higher prices and heighten consumer interest. Whether you're a seasoned pro or new to value-added ventures, come ready to exchange ideas and gain valuable insights into maximizing your products' potential and boost your bottom line!

Promotion & Education: Connecting and Impacting Your Local Communities **VanDyk Center A-2**

Come share strategies for effective community outreach and enhancing consumer engagement. Connect with other members over their recent events and brainstorm new ways to foster agricultural education in your community.

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Sowing Seeds of Change: Returning to the Family Farm VanDyk Center A-3

Share stories, challenges and innovative ideas for tackling what can sometimes be both a financial and personal struggle to return to the family farm. Come ready to engage, ask questions and contribute to a vibrant conversation about the future of farming and the legacies we carry forward.

Members Become Movers: Empowering Involvement Delta Hotel Muskegon Lake

Come together as Farm Bureau members to discuss how best to foster a culture of active engagement. Use this opportunity to discover how to enhance participation, empower members to take on leadership roles, and increase volunteerism.

Nourishing Communities: Tackling Hunger and Food Access Delta Hotel Mona Lake

Engage in dynamic discussion about food security and local-level Harvest for All initiatives. Work together to devise new ways for fighting food insecurity in your community.

Life in Sync: Achieving Balance Together Delta Hotel Twin Lake

Explore the concept of life balance in a supportive, collaborative environment. This session encourages participants to share their personal experiences, challenges and strategies for creating harmony in both your life's work and relationships. Join in to seek advice, offer insights or just connect with others along your journey.

Agritainment Marketing Delta Hotel White Lake

Join the fun with like-minded peers and discover how to offer effective agricultural activities that engage customers and attract repeat business. Dive into marketing, logistics and sustainability in this discussion around a fast-growing market.

Row Crop Marketing VanDyk Center Ballroom D

Exchange effective strategies, tools and resources for marketing staple row crops like corn and soybeans. Learn what your fellow farmers are doing to increase their bottom lines with the latest digital marketing tools.

3:00 p.m. Break

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3:10 p.m. 30-minute breakouts (some repeat)

From the Field to Lansing: Where Policy Intersects with Your Farm (repeats)

MFB Staff: Pierce Bennett, Industry Relations Specialist; Nancy Nyquist, Policy Specialist; and Theresa Sisung, Industry Relations Specialist **VanDyk Center A-1**

MFB staff specialists will provide timely updates on Michigan-specific livestock and crop issues, with a focus on legislative measures impacting your farm business. This is your chance to get better informed about vital issues and legislative changes that could affect your operation.

Navigating the Lending Process to Help Grow Your Business

Jonathan LaPorte, MSU Extension Farm Business Management Educator **VanDyk Center A-2**

What benefits do loans really provide your farm business? How do you prepare to apply? What do lenders look for when reviewing a loan request? Get these answers and better understand how loans can help grow your farm business.

Come Build with Us! (repeats)

Katie Cooper, MFB Promotion & Education Specialist; Cody Baker, Michigan Ag in the Classroom Regional Ag Educator, Michelle Blodgett, MAITC Manager **VanDyk Center A-3**

From fairs to classrooms to Projects RED, you'll find new and revamped hands-on activities for your local outreach programming, and return home with examples of fun new make-and-takes. Let's build together!

Agent Engagement: Working Together to End Hunger

Persis Sopariwala, Agent Charitable Fund Manager and Angela Shannon, Farm Bureau Insurance Agent
Delta Hotel Muskegon Lake

Eager to fight hunger in your community? Learn how to magnify your Harvest for All efforts by collaborating with local Farm Bureau Insurance agents! This session covers several ways your Family of Companies fights hunger, and how building relationships with local agents can help you connect with resources and boost your hunger-relief efforts.

Farm Labor: Thinking Outside the Box (repeats)

Emily Klingbeil, Great Lakes Ag Labor Services Account Manager **Delta Hotel Mona Lake**

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Farm labor is nothing but hot topics. Learn how to address challenges in finding, keeping and managing farm labor, including the H-2A temporary worker program. Collaborate on best practices and resources for effective team development.

Your Grocery List for Mental Health, Sane Farming and Volunteer Retention

Sarah Zastrow, Cultivate Balance and Midland County FB Board Member **Delta Hotel Twin Lake**

Stabilize mood swings and afternoon crashes while balancing out lulls and ensuring everyone has the fuel to be at their best, whether on the farm, in the classroom or during a county FB event! Whether you're wrangling toddlers or seniors, learn how your grocery list impacts on your mental health.

Building County-Wide Farm Networks

Katie Christie, Barry County FB Promotion & Education Chair **Delta Hotel White Lake**

Join us to explore how a county wide consumer-friendly farm directory was created to connect local communities with farmers who sell directly to consumers. Learn about the process of setting up the website, gathering data, managing listings, and promoting the directory. We'll share insights into the challenges faced, successes achieved, and offer valuable lessons for creating similar community-driven projects.

Farm Safety and Fire Rescue: Protecting Michigan's Ag Community (repeats)

Jonathon Degen, Rural Rescue Educators **VanDyk Center Ballroom D**

Join us to discuss the crucial importance of farm safety and the role of local fire departments in farm rescues. Through real-life case studies and practical recommendations, we'll empower attendees with the knowledge and tools needed to enhance farm safety and improve emergency response capabilities in Michigan's farm sector.

YF Awards Workshop (repeats)

MFB Staff and State Young Farmer Committee Members **Delta Hotel Bear Lake**

Unsure how to start applying for a Young Farmer award? Have an application started but want to polish your answers? Drop in to work with State Young Farmer Committee members and Michigan Farm Bureau staff eager to help whip your application into shape. (Applications are due March 12, 2025.)

3:40 p.m. Break

4:00 p.m. 30-minute breakouts (some repeat)

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Alternatives to Financial Recordkeeping Software

Corey Clark, MSU Extension Farm Business Management Educator
VanDyk Center A-2

As the landscape of financial software evolves, it's important to critically evaluate our options. In this session we'll compare common packages, including QuickBooks Online and PC Mars. We'll compare their relative strengths and weaknesses, and explore how to exploit their fullest potential.

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Bringing the Farm to School: Child Nutrition Market Opportunities

Cheyenne Liberti, Michigan Department of Education Farm to Program Consultant **Delta Hotel White Lake**

Did you know every public school in Michigan can receive grant funds to buy Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables and dry beans? Learn how the 10 Cents a Meal Program can support Michigan farmers – and how to build your capacity to launch or grow these marketing efforts. Experts from MDE, MSU Center for Regional Food Systems, and MSU Extension will answer your questions and help you connect with schools and childcare centers.

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5:00 p.m. Reception

5:45 p.m. Dinner and Keynote Program

After a busy day of learning, we hope you'll enjoy the levity provided by our keynote speaker Chris Koch, who doesn't let limitations or obstacles stand in his way. Despite being born without arms and legs Koch grew up like any other small-town kid-playing road hockey, causing mischief at school, and helping on his family farm. Today, Koch is a motivational speaker who inspires his audiences to continually challenge themselves and build the life they dream of.

8:30 p.m. Evening Entertainment

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An Evening of Fun, Games, and Snack Salad Showdown! — Join us for a casual and entertaining evening where fun and flavor take center stage! Whether you're looking to test your gaming skills, relax with fellow attendees, or create a snack masterpiece, this evening has it all.

- **Bingo Bonanza: Build Your Ultimate Snack Salad:** Test your luck in a lively game of Bingo, but with a tasty twist! Each time you call "Bingo," you'll earn an extra scoop to add to your Snack Salad creation. Choose from a delightful array of sweet, savory, crunchy, and delicious toppings to craft your own unique mix. Once Bingo wraps up, your Snack Salad will be judged by our panel of celebrity judges based on creativity, taste, and presentation. Will your salad reign supreme?
- **Card Game Corner:** Looking for some friendly competition? Challenge your colleagues to classic card games like poker or rummy, or try your hand at something new. Whether you're an expert or a beginner, it's a great way to bond over a deck of cards.
- **Board Game Blast:** Rediscover your favorite board games or dive into a new one! From strategic games to fun party classics, there's a game for everyone, making it the perfect way to connect with fellow attendees.
- **Relax & Mingle:** If games aren't your thing, feel free to kick back and relax. Mingle with other attendees, share stories, and make new connections in a cozy, welcoming space.

11:00 p.m. Close of evening entertainment

Sunday, March 2

7:00 a.m. Registration opens

7:00 a.m. Devotions

8:15 a.m. Breakfast for workshop attendees

9:15 a.m. Workshop sessions - must register in advance

Real Colors Assessment

Betty Jo Krosnicki, MSU Extension Supervising Educator **VanDyk Center A - 1**

Participants in this session will take a [brief assessment](#) to help them uncover their dominant "color." Then we'll dig deeper to learn how your temperament influences your communication, leadership style,

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interpersonal skills, teamwork, relationships, goal setting, learning preferences, and how you approach their work.

Communication Strategies to Inspire Trust and Confidence

Donna Moenning, Center for Food Integrity Senior Director **VanDyk Center A - 2**

Today, more than ever, interest in food goes beyond taste, nutrition and price. Consumers want to know how and where their food is produced, who produces it, and its impact on people, animals and the planet. This session unpacks consumer trends impacting food and agriculture, and provides communication strategies to address your most challenging questions and help you inspire trust and confidence.

Lean Thinking in Agriculture: Smarter Processes, Better Results

Trey Malone, Purdue University Boehlje Endowed Chair for Managerial Economics in Agribusiness

VanDyk Center A - 3

Maximize efficiency and minimize waste by applying Lean Farming and Six Sigma principles to your agricultural operation. In this hands-on session, you'll learn how to identify and eliminate the six key types of waste inspired by Toyota's manufacturing model and adapt them to the unique challenges of farming and agribusiness. We'll explore the Lean Canvas framework, a practical tool for analyzing your market, defining your value proposition, and making smarter business decisions on a tight budget. Whether you're a farmer or an agribusiness entrepreneur, this workshop will help you streamline operations, focus on what truly matters, and build a resilient, cost-effective business.

Practical Farm Finance: Solutions for Stability and Growth

Michael H. McKeown, Partner at McKeown Kraai Professional, CPAs **VanDyk Center Ballroom D**

This session will simplify the financial strategies essential for today's farm operations. By exploring basic tools and working through real-life case studies, you'll gain tangible processes that can be implemented immediately to improve both the current and future financial health of your operation. Walk away with practical insights to enhance your farm's stability and success.

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Around the World in Agriculture

Chris Koch, Keynote Speaker **VanDyk Center Ballroom BC**

Join adventurer, farmer and agricultural advocate Chris Koch on a journey to explore farming practices around the world. From lush rice paddies in Southeast Asia to the Australia's vast wheat fields, Chris has gained unique insights into diverse agricultural landscapes. In this engaging session, Chris shares his firsthand experiences and offers a global perspective on farming that can enhance North American agriculture. Through his travels, he has observed innovative techniques, traditional methods and the endless challenges faced by farmers in regions around the globe. He'll share how these observations can enrich our understanding and critical thinking about agriculture right here at home.

11:00a.m. Adjourn