

Houghton Middle School wins Lexus Eco Challenge again

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Photo courtesy of Sarah Geborkoff Houghton Middle Schools students recently won the Lexus Eco Challenge for the third time. Pictured: (Back row L to R) Seojun Yoon, Sully Maki, Davin Evans, Logan Sandell, Seth Hyslop; (Front row L to R) Mercedes Gregersen, Linda Tang, Sonia Jin, Micaela Geborkoff, Leah Berkey

HOUGHTON — For the third time, Houghton Middle School students have won the Lexus Eco Challenge in the Land and Water category. The team of 10 eighth grade students titled their project *“Backyard Backlash,”* and focused on how to prevent nitrate-laden water from reaching Lake Superior. The team studied how the surface and groundwater contamination in the Upper Peninsula comes from nitrate-rich fertilizers and top soils as a result of lawn and garden care, roadside grass seeding projects, and agricultural practices.

The contamination eventually reaches Lake Superior.

The team also looked at how individual families can impact water quality, even in their own backyards. They also looked at why plants need nitrates and why they must only be in amounts correct to soil and plants.

They conducted their own experiments, gathered information, and created ways to reduce the impacts of nitrates on water quality. They also sought ways to engage local youth in the project. Once the numerous experiments were completed and the information was gathered, the team had to create a

presentation to deliver to the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), which led to more experiments and studies.

With different teams each year, HMS students won the challenge in 2014 with their invasive species education project, and again in 2015 with their project to identify a grass species that could grow on copper-laden stamp sands.

Sarah Geborkoff, a Houghton Middle School science teacher, and the team's teacher advisor, has participated in the Lake Superior Stewardship Initiative (LSSI) since 2014.

"This year's team, HMS Backyard Backlash, has worked really hard," Geborkoff said. "They are also completing a project for the Air and Climate competition, which they will finish by the December 11 deadline."

This second project involves studying the impact of burning plastics in backyard barrels and why people should work together as a community to find alternatives to burning plastic, Geborkoff said. She receives biannual grants from LSSI to support projects that incorporate environmental monitoring and stewardship in the Huron River Watershed.

Geborkoff said this year's challenge win has an added benefit: her daughter was able to participate on the team.

"LSSI has changed my professional life," Geborkoff said, "and now my personal life, as I watch the impact on my own daughter."

Joan Chadde, Geborkoff's mentor for the LSSI project, said she is elated at HMS' success.

"Sarah Geborkoff is a phenomenal teacher," Chadde said, "who continually goes above and beyond for her students. They start these projects during the summer. These are truly student-led projects. Sarah is an excellent teacher and student mentor."

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