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BASEBALL IS BACK

WITH STRONG STARTING PITCHING, THE DETROIT TIGERS ARE IN POSITION TO WIN THE AMERICAN LEAGUE CENTRAL DIVISION FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE 2014. THEY OPEN THE SEASON TODAY. **C1**

PLASTIC POLLUTION

Michigan 'nurdle' spill underscores a chronic Great Lakes threat

Plastic pellets litter the Kalamazoo River bank on Feb. 26. Several thousand pounds of industrial polystyrene pellets called "nurdles" spilled onto the side of I-196 during a truck crash near Saugatuck on Jan. 27. *Photos by Garret Ellison, MLive.com*

Thousands of pounds of plastic pellets spilled alongside the Kalamazoo River, but researchers say the incident reflects a much larger microplastic problem.

Garret Ellison *gellison@mlive.com*

SAUGATUCK — The white plastic pellets that spilled into the Kalamazoo River are small enough to fit several on a fingernail.

They're also part of a much larger problem.

The "nurdles" that scattered along Interstate 196 and into the river after a Jan. 27 semitractor-trailer crash are the same industrial pellets that researchers have been finding for years on Great Lakes beaches from Benton Harbor to the northern shore of Lake Superior.

The pellets are microplastic — and they don't do wildlife any favors.

"They certainly have the potential to be consumed by any kind of (bottom-feeding) fish," said Alan Steinman, a Grand Valley State University freshwater scientist.

"Even if they're not contaminated with biofilm that would absorb contaminants like we've seen elsewhere, just the physical obstruction in the gut of these animals is going to be problematic because they're not nutritious," Steinman said.

A closeup look at the plastic pellets along I-196 next to the Kalamazoo River, seen on Feb. 26, a month after the crash.

INCREASED TROUBLE

Unfortunately, there's more plastic in the water now following a January crash that state agencies disclosed on Feb. 25, after pollution investigators say they were notified on Feb. 19.

According to the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy, "several thousand pounds" of polystyrene pellets came out of a semitrailer that crashed during a blizzard and left a large pile on the side of the interstate, just a stone's throw from the river.

The crash remains under investigation.

"The call came in once the scope of the spill became clear after there was some snowmelt," said Josef Stephens, EGLE spokesperson.

The pellets are polystyrene feedstock used in manufacturing plastic products. They are about the size of a grain of cooked rice.

The Michigan Department of Transportation closed part of northbound I-196 on Feb. 26 to perform a cleanup.

NOT HARMLESS

It's not clear exactly how much plastic entered the river, but nurdle pellets were visible in small clusters on the riverbed the afternoon of Feb. 26. The spill site is less than four miles upriver from Lake Michigan.

And the pellets don't just sit there harmlessly.

Steinman said such "virgin" feedstock likely wouldn't have absorbed pollutants in the water yet, but once the pellets sink into the sediment, retrieval becomes unlikely.

If large quantities settle in spawning areas, Steinman said, they can clog substrate and interfere with fish reproduction.

'NOT UNCOMMON'

First responders say highway plastic spills aren't unheard of.

Saugatuck Township Fire Chief Greg Janik said he has handled "two or three" similar plastic pellet incidents on the highway during his career. The trucks typically carry dry plastic feedstock in bulk tankers that unload through chutes, he said.

SEE NURDLE SPILL, A3

TOBACCO USE

Retailer licenses proposed to curb youth sales

Michigan lawmakers say requiring licenses could help limit tobacco sales to minors.

Danielle James *djames@mlive.com*

LANSING — "Tobacco nation" is a title reserved for just 12 U.S. states, including Michigan.

The label is given to states where smoking rates are higher than the rest of the country because of a variety of reasons, from lower cigarette taxes to weaker tobacco control policies.

Approximately 13.4% of the state's adults smoke, according to the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids. And while the percentage of high school students who smoke is much lower — 2.1% — the percentage using e-cigarettes is higher, at 15.4%.

State Rep. Jennifer Wortz, R-Quincy, said her daughter, a senior in high school, tells her if you go to the school bathroom and "lift up any ceiling tile, used vapes will roll out."

Lawmakers are hoping to curb that use, specifically by young people.

They say a new plan — requiring stores that sell nicotine products to obtain licenses from the state — could help limit the products' sale to minors while shifting penalties away from the underage purchasers.

SEE TOBACCO USE, A5

ALLENDALE TOWNSHIP

GVSU health care changes 'pulled the rug out'

The university is phasing out its Retiree Medical Program.

Danielle James *djames@mlive.com*

The small print at the bottom of a 2024 handout on early retiree medical benefits states Grand Valley State University can "modify or terminate this plan upon reasonable notice to faculty, staff and retirees."

This year, GVSU did just that.

In a February letter obtained by MLive, the university wrote to eligible retirees that it would phase out its Retiree Medical Program as of Jan. 1, 2027.

Chris Knape, GVSU's assistant vice president of university communications, said this doesn't mean the benefit is ending for faculty who qualify, but instead is changing.

SEE ALLENDALE TOWNSHIP, A4

Advice, D1 **Classified**, C7 **Comics**, D3 **Local**, A2 **Michigan**, B1 **Puzzles**, D2 **Sports**, C1 **Weather**, B2 **Your Money**, A6

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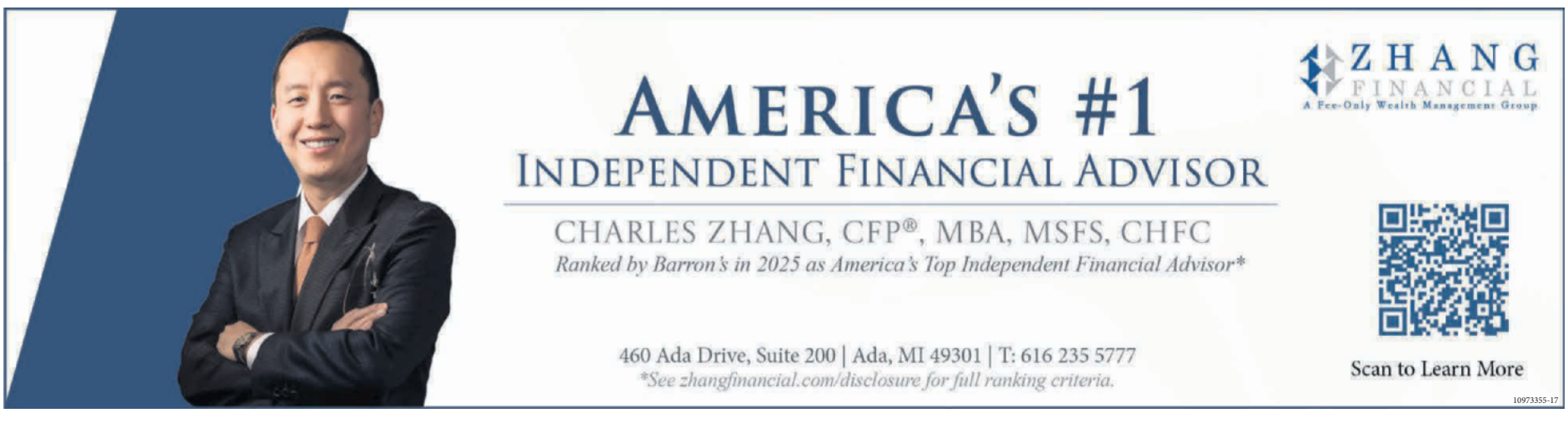
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