

---CONSERVATION DISTRICTS OF IOWA (CDI)---

CONNECTIONS

The Conservation Districts of Iowa (CDI) informs, educates, and leads Iowans through our local soil and water conservation districts to promote conservation of natural resources.



December 2023
Volume 5, Number 3

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From: President Jeri Thornsberry

We have crossed the threshold of Solstice; light has returned!! Spring is on the way. In front of us this year are many opportunities for increasing conservation in Iowa. We have funding, we have solutions, we are hiring additional staff. Our five-year plans are complete and we are executing on that road map. In essence, 2024 is the year we intend to make a difference.

One way to begin is to visit with our elected representatives to tell them our conservation story. Share with them our needs. Ask for more funding. After all, they do want to hear from their constituents. That's us—all 500 elected commissioners from every county in Iowa representing the very same constituency as our state representatives and senators. We are more influential than we sometimes realize. It is time for our voices to be heard.

Join me at our Capitol on Thursday, February 8, 2024 for our annual Iowa Conservation Partnership Day. Invite your representatives to meet you in the rotunda, view the displays, share our key conservation priorities, and then go to lunch together.

Soon we will send out a package of materials to use to prepare for your Capitol visit including a sample letter than would be good to email to your elected representatives before February. Let's start the conversations now.

On another note, Spring Regionals are right around the corner. They begin February 27 and conclude on March 7. Locations and timing will be available soon. Let us know what key issues you would like addressed. We will continue with our training tract for sure. And welcome to our new commissioners that have been recently appointed to serve out various terms of office. Please reach out to Regional Director or CDI staff or me with any questions you may have. We are here to support you.

Finally, may the blessings of this season continue for you and yours throughout the coming year.

Happy New Year!

Executive Director Report – Dien Judge

As we join with family and friends at holiday events over these last weeks of the year, it's always a good time to look back and reflect on the past year. And it's time to think of the new year ahead. This is an exciting time for me, as I've been here at CDI for almost five months and I've met so many dedicated people who want to make Iowa a better place for the future.

CDI is an organization that is focused on the conservation of our precious natural resources of soil and water. We should always keep in mind that we Iowans are blessed with some of the most fertile topsoil in the world. And despite the occasional floods and droughts, we have a natural climate in Iowa that brings annual rainfall that fills our rivers, creeks, lakes and ponds and provides us with ample quantities of life sustaining water. Many, many places on this planet do not have such precious natural resources as we do here in Iowa, and it is our responsibility as Iowans to each do our part to conserve these resources for future generations.

Looking back on these few months I've been here at the CDI office, I've learned that we have a big job to do. But with our strong partnerships of federal, state, local and private organizations, there's always someone who will lend a hand to help. I can't thank the staff of CDI enough for such a warm welcome to me as I got started on the job this year. Each and every one of our dedicated staff members works hard every day to fulfill the mission of CDI.

We had a successful annual conference in August that brought together so many hard-working people who gathered to learn and share knowledge. This was during my first few days on the job here at CDI, and it was a tremendous learning experience. As we look toward the new year, we are already making plans to have an even better annual conference in 2024.

In October I was fortunate to be able to travel to Nashville, TN, to gather with the Association of Conservation Executive Directors for an annual meeting. My counterparts from all around the United States met to swap ideas and hear about other states' successful programs. This was a wonderful networking experience for me, and I'm honored to be among such excellent people doing conservation all around the United States.

I've also traveled around Iowa and attended several of your Soil and Water Conservation Commission meetings in various parts of the state, something I've enjoyed enormously. Iowa is such a beautiful state.

In between this time, we at CDI have launched an all-new agreement with NRCS and we've begun the process of hiring 25 new Administrative Support Staff to be located in each four-county Resource Team area. It's no small project to hire 25 new people in any organization, but we are making progress. So far we have eight applicants who have accepted jobs with us, and they will begin working for us in early January. We continue to conduct job interviews each week and we hope to fill four or five more positions in the next two weeks. Once they're all hired, these CDI staff members are going to be working in each and every district all around the state to help get done the important work of conservation.

As we look to the coming year, we are already deep into the planning process for our Iowa Conservation Partnership Day, which will be held on Thursday, Feb. 8 at the Iowa Capitol. Join us in the rotunda that morning as we meet with legislators and make our voices heard. We have important work that must be done, but we need the cooperation of the legislators and the administration. We simply cannot do what we need to do without their support. Your collective voices can change minds, but we need you there in person. Please mark your calendars and plan to join us for Conservation Partnership Day.

Save the Date!

February 8, 2024

IOWA CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP DAY

Iowa Capitol Rotunda!

Economics of soil health systems: reduced input, increased ROI

A cooperative agreement with NRCS, NACD and the [Soil Health Institute](#) (SHI) worked to assess, demonstrate and communicate the economic benefits of various soil health practices on a range of different operations: [“Economics of Soil Health Systems to Enhance Adoption and Environmental Benefits.”](#) To accomplish these goals, NACD and SHI interviewed 30 producers, including 25 [NACD Soil Health Champions](#) across the nation – among them, CDI Vice President and Region 4 Director Don Elsbernd (Allamakee), and CDI Treasurer and Region 7 Director Jack Boyer (Tama) – on the economics of soil health management systems (SHMS) across a range of different crop types, soil types, geographies, weather patterns, management practices and more. Key findings from the soil health management systems research include:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On average, after implementing a SHMS, it cost producers \$14/acre less to grow corn, \$7/acre less to grow soybean, and \$16/acre less to grow all other crops. • Adopting a SHMS not only reduced expenses, but also increased net farm income. • Across 29 farms, SHMS increased net farm income by an average of \$65/acre. • Yield increases due to SHMS were reported for 42% of farms growing corn, 32% of farms growing soybean, and 35% of farms growing other crops. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cover crop seed costs averaged \$21/acre for corn, \$16/acre for soybean, and \$25/acre when used with other crops. • Four farms grazed cover crops, allowing them to increase revenue by an average of \$26/acre. • Additional reported benefits of adopting SHMS included decreased erosion and soil compaction, earlier access to fields in wet years, and increased resilience to extreme weather, among other benefits. |
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c CDI Treasurer and Region 7 Director Jack Boyer

According to their SHI video interviews, both Jack Boyer and Don Elsbernd expressed no doubt conservation practices improve several key soil health concerns and enhance production profitability. In trials with strip-till and no-till, Boyer said he saw no degradation in yields and improved infiltration. “I use strip till on my seed corn and no-till on everything else. That has worked out great,” Boyer said. “As far as the benefits being worth the cost, I’d say, ‘Yes, absolutely they’re worth it’, or I wouldn’t have gone to 100 percent cover crops on it.” His goals to increase organic matter, erosion control and nutrient cycling were all achieved.

At Don Elsbernd’s operations, yields continued to improve year-to-year as they had in the past, even with very robust cover crops. “The benefits of these practices are absolutely worth the work that we’re putting into it,” said Elsbernd. “When you look at soil loss, depending how you value that, there’s going to be an economic return. If you’re increasing yields because your soil health is better, there’s clearly an advantage to that. If you’re saving on nutrients, there’s an economic benefit there. People are really noticing the enhanced weed control you get with having cover crops out there. So you start putting all those things together, it doesn’t take long to get a return on investment.” To hear more in their 4-5 minute videos, click for [Jack Boyer video](#) and [Don Elsbernd video](#).



CDI VP and Region 4 Director Don Elsbernd

CDI Resolutions take next step with state committee review

In a December meeting of the State Soil Conservation and Water Quality Committee (SSCWQC), three of five CDI Resolutions that passed out of the 77th CDI Annual Conference in August were voted for approval:

- **Increase Cover Crop Cost Share for Previous Users** – The state committee agreed with the concept and supports IDALS continuing to explore possible solutions for this issue.
- **Change Policy Within Historic Preservation Act** – The committee agrees with this concern and supports CDI elevating the concern to NACD and other national levels.
- **Increase the Minimum and Maximum Salary Range for State Soil Conservation Technicians** – The committee agrees with this concern and supports IDALS ongoing efforts to find solutions to the situation.

Two other CDI Annual Conference resolutions failed to pass the state full committee: “Revise Rules for Bioreactors, Saturated Buffers, and Wetland Restoration on Conservation Reserve Program” and “Make (580) Stream Bank Protection an Eligible Practice for Funding Under the SF 512 Program”.

Iowa SWCDs considered 12 resolutions in pre-conference voting. Three passed and one failed because it did not reach the required 60% approval and therefore failed; and eight resolutions received more than 50% positive votes, but less than 60%, and were then presented for debate at the August conference in Ames. Of those eight resolutions to be discussed, two were approved, five failed and one was withdrawn as a commissioner from the authoring district was not present.

Iowa legislature considering unfinished business regarding soil health, ‘state committee’ proposed changes

Jim Obradovich

President and CEO at The Capitol Group, LC



Jim Obradovich

In just a short time, the 2024 Session of the Iowa Legislature will get underway. The first day of the scheduled 100-day gathering is Monday, January 8. Legislative Leaders have stated that it is their desire to “hit the ground running,” and begin consideration of issues in the areas of education, taxes and public safety early in the Session. Along with supporting the many soil and water conservation appropriations, CDI will continue to ask lawmakers to add both the term and definition of “soil health” to Iowa law. Last Session the House of Representatives passed House File 282 on a vote of 95-0. The bill now awaits consideration by the Senate Agriculture Committee. CDI will also closely follow the legislation that is needed to implement the recommendations of the “Committee on Committees” that met this fall and

called for the elimination of, changes to, or consolidations of over 200 current state boards and commissions. Finally, please make it a priority to attend Partnership Day at the State Capitol. This is a great opportunity for Commissioners to meet face-to-face with the lawmakers from their county and explain why protecting our state’s most valuable natural resources, our soil and water, is so important.

NRCS Obligates Record \$85.8 Million in Conservation Funding to Iowa Farmers

NRCS obligated a record \$85.8 million in conservation practice funding to Iowa farmers in fiscal year 2023, through 1,628 conservation program contracts that will help treat natural resource concerns such as soil erosion and water quality on 386,736 acres.

Conservation program contracts typically run three to five years, depending on the program. The obligated funds are nearly \$3 million more than the prior record of \$83 million in fiscal year 2021, and \$16 million more than the prior five-year average.

“This is a great opportunity for Iowa landowners to address resource concerns on their farms.”

-State Conservationist Jon Hubbert

IRA Funding

NRCS State Conservationist Jon Hubbert says a major reason for the increase in conservation funding is the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which helped NRCS provide \$18.6 million to Iowa farmers in 2023. Hubbert says the IRA offers unprecedented funding for several existing programs. “We are using IRA funds to provide direct climate mitigation benefits to Iowa landowners and expanding access to NRCS assistance to increase conservation on Iowa’s private lands,” he said.



Iowa farmers like Jon Bakehouse (right) of Mills County are utilizing USDA-NRCS conservation programs to diversify their operations while protecting and enhancing their natural resources, such as soil health, water quality and wildlife habitat.

IRA funding is targeted to support climate-smart agriculture mitigation and help farmers build resilience in their operations. Examples of eligible practices include cover crops, no-till farming, nutrient management, prescribed grazing, and tree planting. “Many of the conservation efforts Iowa producers are adopting through IRA offer stacked benefits,” said Hubbert. “They are also benefitting soil health, water quality, wildlife habitat and protecting other resource concerns.”

Hubbert says IRA funding will increase over the next few years. “This is a great opportunity for Iowa landowners to address resource concerns on their farms,” he said. “The support for voluntary conservation at the local and national level has never been greater.”

For more detailed Iowa NRCS program results and information, go to <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2023-11/2023At-A-Glance.pdf>.

Timeline reminders for statewide participation for popular SWCD local and statewide projects

CDI Poster Contest entries due to local SWCD office April 26



Applicants must submit their poster art – accompanied by the Poster Contest Entry Form – to the SWCD office in the county which their school or group is located by Friday, April 26th. Entry forms must be legible and complete, including a guardian/parental signature and their SWCDs information or the poster cannot be considered. Make sure a copy is securely attached to the back of the submitted poster. For much more information, please consult [Poster Contest critical dates and rules](#). For more general information, and to view Iowa SWCD's 2023 state winners (now in the NACD national contest) visit [CDI Poster Contest](#).

Envirothon registrations due to CDI by February 23, 2024

The Iowa Envirothon state competition will be held April 29th at Jester Park. To get there, teams will first be challenged in Regional competition tests, which once again in 2024 will be held virtually in an online testing format. Envirothon virtual tests will be open to take starting Monday, March 18th through Friday, March 29th. Check online for updates and more information, including registration form, sample study guide and sample tests, rules and regulations, and links to the national event: [2024 Envirothon](#). Registrations are due by February 23, 2024. For questions, please contact carlee@cdiowa.org.



Scholarship applications due to local district February 9, 2024

Scholarship applicants must submit their scholarship applications to the SWCD Office in the county which they reside in. After final selections, the top three scholarships will be awarded at the state level in the amounts of \$3000, \$2000 and \$1000. Winners from the remaining six regions will each receive \$500. First, second and third place awards will be paid directly to the applicant's school of choice in two equal installments, one upon enrollment at the beginning of the year and the second at midterm. The six other scholarships will be paid directly to the students. To review "2024 Conservation Scholarship Rules" and "2024 Scholarship Application", please visit [2024 CDI Scholarship Program](#).

SWRCP in progress – first in a series

Insights from the facilitator front lines

By Claire Carlson

CDI Planning Coordinator

The 5-year Planning process is new. It takes a little time to be integrated into an everyday routine, or – if considering district meeting schedules – your monthly routine. I think we’re just in the beginning phases with the 5-year plan – starting the integration and implementation of goals is coming into focus for the districts. That’s the stage we’re in at the moment.



CDI Planner Claire Carlson

There’s a number of districts that I’ve been meeting with in the NE who have begun to make strides to their goals and their 5-year plan. The commissioners and the district staff have a good idea what they want to achieve because they spent the time cultivating the plan, mapping objectives and timelines, and now they’re at the stage of looking at those goals, reviewing them, and moving forward with ideas they had. One example would be ‘increasing social media presence’. That’s one of the biggest things one district had trouble with – they didn’t feel most people in the district realized who they were, and they didn’t have a concerted effort focused on that outreach. Multiple districts that I’ve been meeting with have begun to create those media channels and integrate more outreach efforts through newsletters and field days.

Some of the districts I’ve worked with have unique educational goals for young students. In one district, for example, they have a goal to host a “career day” as a field day in their office and invite students from local schools to learn about what they do. As I reviewed their plans with them during their check-in recently, we discussed how this is a unique goal that I haven’t seen any other districts develop. We’ve also had districts see an expansion in on-the-ground conservation practices implemented in their district and achieve the specific percentage increases they wanted solely because of their enhanced, 5-year plan-motivated outreach. They achieved this goal by making a concentrated effort to expand the knowledge of those practices and encouraging them among producers in their district.

Another thing I found interesting in checking-in with districts “post-planning process” is there seems to be a lot of cross-coordination for goals and for ideas. In two districts in the northeast, one is raffling off a rain barrel to raise funds for the district, and another district utilized that idea in their own county. I think it’s beneficial for everyone to hear about this idea – an excellent urban residential conservation practice, a way to get other individuals involved in conservation that may not be already involved in it, and a way to raise money for the district.

A final thought: I’m not a “regulatory figure”. I get to enjoy seeing the advances that the people I’ve come to know have made in local conservation, even though this is a new process and we’re all learning together. I see more energized SWCDs than when we started two and three years ago. So, thank yourselves and thank your office staff for putting the time and effort into achieving the progress you’re making with your plan!

In the first of a series, we’re asking CDI Planners to share “top of mind” insights and their experience helping facilitate the 5-year Soil and Water Resource Conservation Plans in their respective regions, an effort critical to Iowa’s overall conservation and sustainability goals.

Where do you get your farm safety information?

By Tabitha Kuehn

Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health

As I-CASH wraps up another year of agricultural safety campaigns, we have been reflecting on what we have accomplished in 2023. Farm safety resources were delivered to FSA and ISU extension offices in every single county! We covered a wide range of safety topics; in the spring we focused on chemical storage, over the summer we addressed safe mowing, and this fall we concentrated on combine and tractor fire prevention.

To close out 2023, we sent the 2024 version of our beloved I-CASH calendar out to each county. Each month features a beautiful Iowa farm photo and a prompt with information on a specific health and safety topic ranging from digging safety (this might be a good reminder for those involved in conservation dirt work) to landlord tenant communication.

I encourage you all to look for a calendar and other safety information we have sent the next time you visit your local FSA or ISU extension office. I also encourage you to share this information with other farmers in your community! At the Midwest Rural Agricultural Safety and Health conference in November, a panel of youth and grandparent aged farmers were asked, "Where do you get your farm safety information?"

All of the answers included some variation of family and friends. Those of you who are commissioners and service center staff likely involved in agriculture yourself as well as interact and care about a lot of folks who work in agriculture. Help make sure they have the resources to be safe. Tell them to check for safety campaigns at the FSA and ISU extension offices, direct them to our website (i-cash.org), and lead by example! I hope safe farming for all is one of your 2024 goals- we promise it is one of ours! Please reach out to us if you have safety information or resource requests! Tabitha-kuehn@uiowa.edu.



Iowa Learning Farms Webinars

Wednesdays at 12pm CT
 1/3/2024: Mike Castellano, Iowa State University
 1/10: Gabe Johnson, Iowa State University
 1/17: Chaoqun Lu, Iowa State University
 1/24: Amanda Gumbert, University of Kentucky
 1/31: Katie Dentzman, Iowa State University

Join live: [LINK](#) Read future session blog: [LINK](#)

A CDI Connections 2023 SWCD-focused year review

The best we do on these pages is share what you do as commissioners and staff, dedicated to the health of our Iowa farm and urban landscapes. In 2024, we want to tell more of your stories! Let us know what's happening in your district and we'll announce it statewide for other SWCDs. Local profiles, programs, projects, pictures – all perfect to share!

“Cattle & Conservation Project” expands to northwest Iowa
Five SWCDs receive WQI funding to help restore marginal land

***A journey around the state for
Soil and Water Conservation Week!***

12 districts share photo highlights

Jasper SWCD Prairie Seed Farm

**A vision to preserve native grass celebrates 20 years of
production**

Story SWCD named outstanding district for 2023

Madison SWCD “Pasture Field Day”

“There’s just something about getting people together...”

Allamakee SWCD Receives Grant for Planting Kernza

From all your friends at Conservation Districts of Iowa:

**Happy New Year and Best Wishes
for Continued Success in 2024!**