

---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.



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From: CDI President Ramona Nitz

I'm happy to have the chance to wish you all a very Merry Christmas and a Happy and Healthy New Year. May your holiday season be filled with time with family and friends and lots of chances to make wonderful new memories!

I'd like to take this opportunity to welcome any new commissioners who were just elected to their SWCD commissions for the first time. I look forward to meeting you in the months ahead. Thank you to you and to the commissioners who decided to run for re-election this year. Your dedication to our cause of locally led conservation is greatly appreciated.

I'm looking forward to seeing you commissioners from all across the state in Des Moines on January 11 as we gather together to talk with our state legislators for our annual "Partnership Day". They truly do like to hear from us so please do plan to attend. We will hope for good weather!

Ramona

Save the Date!

January 11, 2023

CDI PARTNERSHIP DAY

Iowa Capitol, Des Moines!

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

CDI continues to look for qualified individuals to fill open positions. We are currently understaffed by three positions in our DNR program: two Wetland Easement Team Specialist (WET) positions and one Private Lands Wildlife (PLW) position. One of our PLF staff has official accepted a new position in Colorado and will be leaving in early December which will mean two open PLW positions. We do have an individual hired for one of the positions beginning in early January and are interviewing another person on November 30. We are currently keeping an open advertisement for all the positions. If you know someone who is interested in one of these positions, please have them contact me directly at: john@cdiowa.org

We received 50 responses to the annual conference survey. Several indicated that holding the meeting at a different time of year would work better for them but not all respondents indicated that timing is an issue. Some stated that a one-day meeting could be appropriate. Most felt that the speakers and workshops were beneficial and educational. We continue to gather your input and the event planning committee will meet multiple times to discuss the annual conference. Partnership Day is scheduled for January 11, 2023, at the Capitol. Training for commissioners and assistant commissioners who attend the event will begin at approximately 11:30 AM. We hope that those attending will contact their legislators and try to have lunch with them that day. The theme will be 'One Water', which follows the NACD theme for 2023.

This space reserved for you!

Special announcement? Save the date? Invitation?

Memorial tribute to those who have passed?

In future *CDI Connections*, if your district has something to share,
we'd like to share it for you!

 joe@cdiowa.org

2023 Internship Applications Now Being Accepted Through IDALS and SWCD Partnership Program

IDALS is sponsoring an internship program for summer of 2023 hosted through local Soil and Water Conservation Districts. IDALS will fund up to 90% of the hourly wage with a minimum 10% local match contribution from participating SWCDs. Types of work activities are up to each SWCD to decide but should be a diversified set of activities that supports the mission of IDALS, SWCDs and supporting partners. Work examples may include practice layout and checkout, conservation planning, mapping, landowner contacts, news articles, water monitoring, urban conservation, resource inventory and other conservation projects. Please consider hosting an intern next summer and discuss this opportunity at your next monthly business meeting. If your District is interested in hosting an intern position, please complete the information distributed to all Conservation Assistants via email on October 31st. If you have any questions about the Intern program, contact your Field Representative. Applications for funding consideration are due to IDALS by December 16th and decisions are anticipated by early January 2023.

Increased Funding for the Mines and Minerals Bureau

Vince Sitzmann,
Mines and Minerals Bureau Chief

For those of you not familiar with the Mines and Minerals Bureau with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, we are responsible for licensing the over 1,000 sand, gravel, limestone, gypsum, and clay quarries around the state. The Minerals Inspector monitors these sites for compliance with Iowa Code and to ensure that each site is bonded so the mine can be reclaimed when mining ceases. The Bureau is also responsible for reclaiming abandoned surface coal mines. Yes, that's right, I said coal mines! Coal production in Iowa peaked around 1917, ranking as high as 5th in production in the United States.

Although the last active coal mine in Iowa closed in 1994, the remnants from a booming industry in the early 1900's still dot the landscape in southeast Iowa, lying undisturbed long after the bustling mining camps, drag lines, and railroads disappeared. Iowa has nearly 180 abandoned surface coal mines remaining that are in need of reclamation.

Abandoned Mine Lands (AML) sites typically include dangerous piles and embankments, highwalls, subsidence, pit ponds, and bare acidic soils that pollute water through erosion,

sedimentation, and acid mine drainage. Reclamation of these sites involves mass grading to abate the hazardous features, reducing or eliminating the adverse effects of past coal mining on the environment, and restoring adversely affected waters and land to beneficial uses. AML site designs are highly engineered and incorporate conservation practices such as terraces, grade stabilization structures and wetlands.

The program is 100% federally funded through annual grants received from the Office of Surface Mine Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE). The funding originates from a tax on every ton of coal that's mined in the U.S. Funds generated from the tax are dispersed to states (including Iowa) to support AML programs across the country in an effort to reclaim AML sites that were mined prior to the implementation of the Surface Mine Control and Reclamation Act of 1977.

Historically, Iowa has received funding for this program since 1983, with recent allocations totaling approximately 2.89 million annually, but recent funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Legislation has injected a \$6 million annual increase in funding for Iowa's AML program over the next 15 years. This level of increased funding will triple the existing AML program budget allowing the Bureau to fast track its reclamation efforts on the remaining AML sites. To learn more about the AML program, please visit the departments website at <https://iowaagriculture.gov/mines-and-minerals-bureau> or give us a call at 515-281-6147



Top photos: AML site before reclamation. Bottom photos: AML Site after reclamation

CDI staff attend launch of new professional learning experience

Land Stewardship Leadership Academy holds inaugural graduation

Twenty natural resource professionals from across Iowa were part of the first ever “Land Stewardship Leadership Academy” graduation ceremony, held Oct. 13 at the Iowa State University Alumni Center. CDI Wildlife Specialist Matt Theisen was among those inaugural graduates, and he believes the nine-month learning experience greatly sharpens the knowledge and communication skills required to advance the cause of conservation in Iowa.



L-R: Adam Janke, Wildlife Specialist; Julia Baker, Natural Resources Program Specialist; Matt Theisen, CDI Wildlife Specialist; Catherine DeLong, Water Quality Extension Specialist

“I’ve definitely grown throughout the process, just learning about agriculture, learning about farmers and their backgrounds,” Theisen says. “A lot of us don’t have agricultural backgrounds, me included. I grew up in Minneapolis. So, one goal of the academy was to introduce people who are not from rural Iowa, who did not grow up on a farm, and help them navigate conversations with farmers and empathize with farmers.” (CDI SW Planner and executive director at Golden Hills RC&D Cara Marker-Morgan also joined the inaugural cohort.)

ISU Associate Professor and Extension Wildlife Specialist Adam Janke, one of the principal drivers for launching the academy, agrees that young professionals interested in environmental issues need to know how best to communicate and work with those who have the most influence on the environment – and in Iowa, most are farmers. “With this program we thought we could help early career natural resource professionals accelerate that learning curve,” says Janke. “We explore things about agricultural decision-making to try to make these natural resource professionals more effective in their work to conserve water and wildlife resources in the state.”

Graduates included a cohort of professionals from CDI, NRCS, IDALS, state and federal conservation organizations, nonprofits and conservation consultants. The program is designed to bring together professionals in the early to mid-point of their careers and focus on relationship-building with producers, so they may more successfully advance conservation practices that are both sustainable and profitable. Beginning in February, the cohort mixed in-field and classroom learning with online learning and virtual discussions under the guidance of 35 instructors, including farmers and educators from Iowa State University and Iowa State University Extension and Outreach.

Theisen says the greatest take-away may just be meeting those who joined the journey with him. “I think what I got out of the cohort and the Leadership Academy the most was the amount of communication we had back and forth with different people in the cohort, learning about success stories, and hearing about what’s working for people across the state, and being able to contribute what’s working for me, too.” Janke says the education effort was funded solely by grants. For more information, visit the [Leadership Academy website](#).

Turning SWRCP planning into projects

27-year IDALS veteran has a plan for your plan

The two guests on the agenda at a recent meeting of the Ida SWCD had never met. Each had their own cause to promote, their own agenda to push. By meeting's end, however, they realized their ideas could potentially come together in a convenient and timely partnership, to the benefit of the district. "That's where I met Madison," says IDALS Regional Coordinator Bob Waters. "I heard her presentation about the five-year plan and saw a number of opportunities where the district could take that five-year plan and make it part of this process that I'm working on." Madison is CDI NW Planner Madison Conley, on hand to introduce commissioners to how the five-year Soil & Water Resource Conservation Plan (SWRCP) works. And the "process" Waters was there to advocate is part of his on-going engagement with Western Iowa districts to encourage new thinking about conservation practices and watershed projects that could benefit local producers. The 'ah-ha' moment: their two processes could work together.



Regional Coordinator Bob Waters

As a 27-year IDALS veteran – with the Iowa Water Resources Bureau now for the last 17 years – Bob Waters is advocate, strategist, program funds-finder, and trusted guide for commissioners ready to keep advancing local conservation practices. "The approach I'm taking is to lean into commissioners to get them thinking how a particular opportunity might help producers in their county," he

says. "We don't come at them with a program – it's more of a grassroots effort, to get their thoughts on what their needs are and try to match them with a program, identifying the framework of the things they might want to focus on in a project. From there we get involved in the planning process – which is exactly like you would in the five-year plan."

Waters says the goals and priorities of a district five-year plan closely follow with the goals of projects such as watershed improvements. "When you get down in the weeds a little bit further in those plans with actions and milestones, it very closely aligns to when you have a special project going or you want to get one started. Participation in a special project or watershed project is a fantastic way bring your five-year plan to life." That approach could work statewide.

It's familiar territory for Waters. He was instrumental in helping launch an ambitious effort in Taylor County six years ago, dealing with land use changes. The effort – the "Southern Iowa Land Use Conversion Project" – has grown across county borders. "Commissioners brought me in, I sat down with them on a number of different occasions, talking about resource concerns and a multitude of different alternatives to address them," says Waters. "From there, we develop projected outcomes, anticipated funding needs, and develop a plan to secure funding. The point being: these ideas came from the District in Taylor County as a result of great local leadership. They put a fair amount into it and yielded a tremendous return on their investment of time, not only in their county but it bled into Page county and six other districts. That's a pretty good reward for them to look back and see what they've accomplished."

The project success depended on cooperation from many people, but according to Taylor SWCD Vice Chair Paul Ackley, Bob Waters gets credit for the start-up effort success. "He's really been good to work with," says Ackley. "I don't know if it would ever have gotten off the ground if it hadn't been for Bob. He understood what it would take to make it so that it would get approved at the state level. He knows how to write grants. He knows what the land needs, I think that's as important. And he understood the mindset of the people that were taking part in it on the land."

As a longtime resource consultant, Bob Waters is witness to how Iowa land stewardship has evolved. "We've made a lot of progress, but we got a long way to go." The on-going process of bringing together district commissioner concerns, adding experienced professional guidance, and translating those into five-year plan goals is one promising way forward.

NRCS Obligates \$70 Million in Conservation Funding to Iowa Farmers

Conservation practice funding through USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) totaled more than \$70 million to Iowa agricultural producers and other private landowners in fiscal year 2022. The newly contracted conservation practices will help treat natural resource concerns on more than 347,000 agricultural land acres. NRCS staff also wrote 12,041 conservation plans during fiscal year 2022, which cover about 895,000 acres. Conservation plans help producers target and address natural resource concerns such as soil erosion, water quality, and wildlife habitat, in addition to addressing climate change and improving soil health. NRCS provides conservation funding through four primary programs that are authorized through the Farm Bill: Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

NRCS contracted about 45 percent of new federal conservation funding in Iowa through EQIP – a voluntary program that promotes agricultural production and environmental quality, where farmers can choose from a conservation practice list developed at the county level to treat local resource issues. Through EQIP, NRCS obligated \$31.9 million covering 101,403 acres through 838 contracts.

Top Practices Adopted Through EQIP

Three of the most adopted conservation practices by Iowans last year through EQIP include:

- Cover Crops (1,037 contracts/203,900 acres/\$9.9 million)
- Brush Management (308 contracts/3,553 acres/\$956,240)
- Prescribed Grazing (264 contracts/15,247 acres/\$532,761)

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

CSP helps farmers build on existing conservation efforts by customizing a plan to meet conservation goals and needs. Iowa NRCS obligated about \$16.5 million through new and renewed CSP contracts during the past year. In fiscal year 2022, 385 Iowa landowners signed five-year CSP contracts to treat natural resource concerns on 225,842 acres.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

Iowa NRCS provided more than \$9.5 million to Iowa farmers in 2022 through RCPP projects that will help treat natural resource concerns on nearly 17,000 acres. NRCS assisted producers through seven RCPP partnership agreements and 139 contracts. RCPP promotes coordination between NRCS and its partners through agreements and program contracts. The seven RCPP projects in Iowa focus on improving water quality and soil health and creating sustainable grain supply chains.

Easements

Through ACEP, NRCS helps landowners, land trusts, and other entities protect, restore, and enhance wetlands, grasslands, and working farms through conservation easements. Overall, there are 1,710 conservation easements in Iowa covering about 199,167 acres.

[Click here to read the complete report](#), with full breakouts of statewide leaders, program details, and other highlights. For more detailed Iowa NRCS program results and information, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/IA.