

---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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Volume 4, Number 4

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From: CDI President Ramona Nitz

It was certainly a pleasure to see so many new faces at this year's Partnership Day. Thank you to all of you who were able to take time out of your busy schedules to travel to Des Moines for the day. After a briefing by our lobbyist, we all walked over to the Capitol to see our respective legislators.

We also had some time to visit with each other and I was especially excited to see that one of our commissioners and her husband brought their three young children with them to explore our beautiful Capitol and learn more about our great state. I'm already looking forward to next year's event! We are very fortunate to have this chance to make our thoughts known to those who represent us. As soon as we know of the date for next year's event, we will let you know so that you can get it on your calendars.



*Partnership Day training session with
CDI Executive Director John Whitaker and
CDI President Ramona Nitz*

We head to NACD annual conference soon. I will report back to you next month. And, at the end of the month, I'll start my journey around the state as our regional meetings begin. I'll see you then!

Ramona

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

Welcome to newly elected (or re-elected) commissioners! I have a quick question for you: would you be interested in participating in virtual commissioner training conducted via Zoom? We could offer several different topics a couple of different times. Prior to my tenure at CDI, in-person training was offered at a few locations, but attendance was very light and it was recommended to me that we should find another method. I offered some training during the 2019 spring regional meetings but the time constraints of those meetings did not meet the overall need.

We recorded videos on various topics which were played during regular meetings, as well. In 2021, we recorded a series of training videos for all commissioners which we maintain on our website. Those videos can be found at: [New Commissioner Training - Conservation Districts of Iowa \(cdiowa.org\)](https://www.cdiowa.org/new-commissioner-training-conservation-districts-of-iowa)

As our commissioners, we serve *you*, so we truly want to hear from you about training and other needs. Please email me at: john@cdiowa.org with your ideas of how we can offer training or anything else you need.

The spring regional meeting dates for 2023 are set and included in this issue of *Connections*. I am looking forward to seeing as many of you as can attend.

Iowa Envirothon returns to enhance Iowa youth conservation knowledge & experience

By Carlee Sabus
CDI Program Director

Iowa Envirothon is back! We at Conservation Districts of Iowa are excited to welcome the next great group of young Iowans from all over the state for our annual competition, a chance for youth to deep dive into valuable environmental and natural resource problem-solving, teambuilding and leadership experiences! *And we ask for your help!* As district staff and commissioners, we ask for your support to help recruit and guide our young learners through the phases of competition. Will you help us out?



Envirothon challenges students to hone critical thinking skills and create inventive solutions to the complex environmental and natural resource issues facing our world today. Mark your calendars: **the Iowa Envirothon state competition will be held April 24th at Jester Park.** But to get there, teams will first be challenged in Regional competition tests, which in 2023 will be held **virtually** in an online testing format. These tests will be open to take starting **Monday, March 13th through Friday, March 24th.** We hope you'll share this great chance to take part in a rewarding and fun group event with your local young people – high school students grades 9-12 or ages 14-19. This will be their chance to meet others from around Iowa who share our passion for conservation and sustainability. Check online for updates and more information, including registration form, sample study guide and tests from 2022, rules and regulations, and links to the national event: [Iowa Envirothon 2023](https://www.cdiowa.org/iowa-envirothon-2023).

PLEASE ADVISE TEAM LEADERS TO HAVE REGISTRATION FORM AND TEAM MEMBER INFORMATION FORM TURNED IN BY **FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24TH.** You can send these through the mail (address is in my email signature) or you can send them via email to carlee@cdiowa.org. Please let me know if you have any questions, and we're looking forward to another fun and successful Envirothon!

Exciting Times Ahead for NRCS

By Jaia Fischer
Acting Assistant State Conservationist



Jaia Fischer, Acting Assistant State Conservationist

I want to begin by introducing myself. My name is Jaia Fischer, and I am the Acting State Conservationist for USDA-NRCS in Iowa until Jon Hubbert returns from his detail as Acting Regional Conservationist for the Northeast Region. I've been working alongside Jon for many years and will work hard to keep us moving forward in a positive direction until he returns in April. I have been with Iowa NRCS for over 20 years – as a soil conservationist and district conservationist in northwest and central Iowa, and the last 10 years in administration and operations in the state office in Des Moines. I have been the Assistant State Conservationist for Management and Strategy for the past six years. I am excited for this opportunity and know there is a lot of work ahead of us in 2023.

Last year was highlighted by a “return to normal” after two years of dealing with the COVID pandemic. The impacts of the pandemic are felt by the workforce across the country, and NRCS is no different. The pandemic forced us to conduct more virtual meetings and trainings, and although we prefer to provide face-to-face, in-person training, having a virtual option in specific situations moving forward will certainly save time and money. When staff returned to the office in May, we implemented a new telework policy for our employees. Opportunities for telework vary by position and level in the organization, as USDA is committed to providing staff this option and other family-friendly workplace flexibilities. However, our top priority remains providing excellent customer service with the right amount of field office coverage.

Staffing and Office Structure Update

Many of you are aware that NRCS restructured in March 2020, just a few short days prior to the COVID pandemic. Since office coverage was impacted and staffing levels were monitored, we didn't have the opportunity to fully implement the structure as designed. When we returned in May of last year, it was the first real opportunity to implement our staff reorganization with offices not impacted by reduced staffing levels and customer visits heavily restricted.

As a reminder, we developed the reorganization:

- To have a District Conservationist in every field office to allow the DC to work closely with community members, including the SWCD commissioners.
- To have four-county resource teams for more workload flexibility when and where it's needed. Staff assigned to the team support all efforts in the four-county structure.
- To improve our employee to supervisor ratio closer to 10:1.

(Continued next page)

To address concerns expressed about the reorganization:

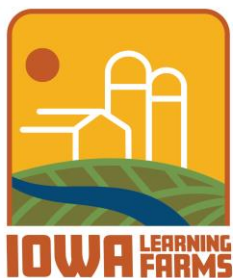
- We plan to add or relocate a soil conservationist to every field office to assist the DC. The soil conservationists can receive office management training, assist with office coverage, and it will offer field office experience to more soil conservationists. The soil conservationist will be supervised by the Resource Team Lead and will also support activities across the county line.
- We have developed action plans within each of the 25 resource teams to address communication and other structural breakdowns. These plans were developed by the Resource Team Leader and the District Conservationists.
- We formed a State Conservationist Advisory Committee (SCAC) that is addressing four goals:
 - Improve communication and collaboration at all levels within the Iowa NRCS organization.
 - Ensure all Iowa NRCS staff and partners understand the roles and responsibilities within our staff structure.
 - Improve the resource team workload tracker tool.
 - Ensure training needs are met throughout Iowa NRCS.

Although we continuously advertise job vacancies, it is difficult to even maintain current staffing levels, due to natural attrition and other delays. We are always looking for talented individuals, and for our current staff, providing real-life training and field experience so they can gain more agricultural experience.

Exciting Time

As you can see, we have challenges ahead of us, but these challenges also create opportunities – both individually and for the agency. We're finding that many new employees don't have agriculture experience and we need local farmers to engage with them and teach them about how conservation compliments production agriculture.

The spotlight on our agency will brighten dramatically over the next decade as we implement practices to help slow climate change and build climate resiliency. About \$20 **billion** of the IRA supports NRCS conservation programs! That is scary and exciting, all at the same time. I hope you are all as excited as I am and help NRCS take on these new opportunities ahead of us!



Iowa Learning Farms Webinars

Staff and commissioners are encouraged to join these valuable weekly webinars, offering insights and updates on issues, updates, and how-to techniques of importance to committed conservation-minded Iowans. Participate in the live events, check out archived webinars from weeks past, and read a blog synopsis of up-coming sessions.

February ILF Webinar Schedule

2/1: Kelsey E. Fisher, Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station
2/8: Pamela Stahlke, USDA – Risk Management Agency
2/9: Virtual Field Day: Beaver Dams and Water Quality with Dr. Billy Beck and Andrew Rupiper, Iowa State University
2/15: Marshall McDaniel, Iowa State University
2/22: Greg LaBarge, The Ohio State University

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

Letting you do the talking!

A different kind of Spring Regional

CDI Spring Regional meetings traditionally offer a yearly opportunity for district commissioners to join others from their respective regions and hear from CDI leadership and state partners to review the year and learn what’s ahead. That’s going to change. In 2023, CDI Regional Directors, IDALS and NRCS commit to turn passive listeners into active participants, in a newly refreshed Spring Regional meeting approach that involves active engagement and interaction with the focus on local issues.

During the January 11th CDI Board of Directors meeting in Des Moines, regional directors welcomed a re-thinking of agendas for Spring Regional meetings that invites more participation from the host districts and commissioner guests. The principal objective is to give more voice to area concerns, according to Region 7 Director and Tama SWCD commissioner Jack Boyer. “The biggest change is we have a segment of the program that is devoted specifically to the geography of that region and to what issues are important to that region, more so than what might be important to some other region or the state in general,” Boyer said. “We want to try to make it more relevant for the membership in that location, and perhaps improve participation and improve attendance.”

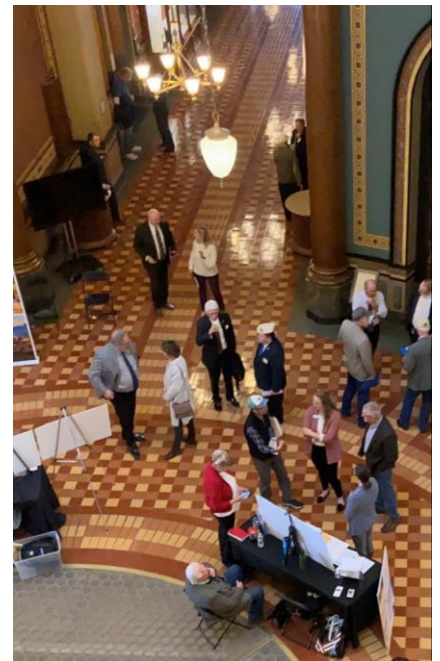
CDI President Ramona Nitz said she noticed the lack of locally focused concerns during 2022 Spring Regional sessions. “We’re not doing that again,” said Nitz. “Nobody has time to come and not be totally involved in what we’re doing.” Spring Regionals begin the end of February and are scheduled through mid-March. “I get phone calls from board members and commissioners about what their concerns are in their regions and they’re not the same. There are different concerns in different regions. We need to take that into consideration when we plan on what we’ll be discussing. For example: I hear from a couple regions they want to hear CDI’s thoughts on carbon sequestration and their pipelines. Well, some regions could care less about that, there’s nothing going through them, like in northwest Iowa where that’s a huge concern.”

2023 Spring Regional Districts			
Region 1	Plymouth	10 AM to 2 PM	March 14
Region 2	Webster	10 AM to 2 PM	March 8
Region 3	Grundy	10 AM to 2 PM	March 7
Region 4	Delaware	4 PM to 8 PM	March 7
Region 5	Guthrie	4 PM to 8 PM	March 8
Region 6	Jasper	2 PM to 6 PM	March 2*
Region 7	Scott	10 AM to 2 PM	March 9
Region 8	Fremont	10 AM to 2 PM	March 1
Region 9	Van Buren	10 AM to 2 PM	February 28

Districts are invited to prepare presentations for the meetings that will champion local successes and address region-based topics. Two examples: Scott SWCD will feature Brain Ritter highlighting the Nahant Marsh Education Center, a wetland complex – formerly a shooting range that left behind heavy doses of lead pellets that sicken or kill native birds. As a designated Superfund site by the EPA, Nahant now serves as an environmental rallying point for the Davenport area. And Jasper SWCD invited their Prairie Grass Seed Farm Manager Eric Imerman to present an overview of a unique, on-going project he manages – 15 acres of land, originally dedicated to preserving local native seeds, today used to raise and sell prairie grasses, seed CRP acres, cover crop plots, host field days (among other activities!) – all part of Jasper SWCD’s educational conservation outreach.

In addition to successes, Director Boyer believes significant concerns should also be open for consideration. “Staffing of offices has been an issue we hear a lot about – having enough people to do the work to get conservation on the ground. Staffing at state and federal levels doesn’t happen overnight,” Boyer says. “Whatever the solution is, we need to get the discussion started.”

Meeting guests will still hear critically important information from CDI, IDALS and NRCS leadership, said Nitz. “Of course, we need to hear from our partners, and we want to. But it will be much more of a streamlined report.” For those commissioners attending, Nitz urges: “Be prepared to participate, be prepared to be part of it. That’s better than sitting there waiting for lunch!”



Partnership Day 2023

One-on-one with Iowa policy makers

As a former legislator himself, CDI Executive Director John Whitaker knows it matters to hear from constituents. “As a legislator, you have your own personal values that you don’t sacrifice, but you *do* listen to your constituents and say, ‘Together, how can we make this work?’” At the January 11th CDI Partnership Day under the Iowa Capitol Rotunda, commissioners sought that type of common ground with policy makers. “For me, sitting down with legislators that day who chair committees and having one-on-one discussions, we could talk it through: ‘This is what you’re hearing, this is what you’re thinking is going to happen, this is what *we’d* like to see happen – is there a way we can blend that together and make it work?’ You’re trying to get ideas that people can agree on. That’s what I found that day – the legislators that I talked to wanted to hear our ideas, they listened to our ideas, and they’re looking for solutions.” And he reminds that one-on-one communication with state policy makers doesn’t end on Partnership Day! “You can always contact your elected representatives through their legislative email address, or you may contact CDI lobbyist Jim Obradovich to relay a personal message to your Senator or Representative.” Commissioners can reach Obradovich at obradovich.jim@gmail.com. Not sure who your local representatives are? Click to find [your State Senator and State Representatives](#).

(Clockwise from the top: State Rep. Eddie Andrews (far left); State Sen. Tony Bisignano (right); gathering beneath Iowa capitol rotunda; State Sen. Jeff Taylor (left) with CDI Region 1 Director and Sioux SWCD Commissioner John Kooiker.