

---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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CDI EXECUTIVE BOARD:

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Vice-President: Jeri Thornsberry
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Past President: Dennis Carney

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From: CDI President Ramona Nitz

It is the first day of the regional meetings. Except for the one held up in NW Iowa in a couple of weeks, I will be based out of Ames for the first two weeks of meetings. So I left Cherokee to head down to our home in Ames. (Go Cyclones!) Bright and early in the morning, I'll start off for Keosauqua for our first meeting. Then I will drive part way to our Wednesday meeting location which is Sidney. Then back up to Ames where I will spend the night before heading to Newton for Thursday's meeting.

Friday, I'll head back to Cherokee for the weekend before starting all over next week! Next week's meeting schedule is a little crazier as there are two meetings scheduled each day. I know I have hundreds and hundreds of miles of driving ahead of me. But it's great because I remind myself of last year and how much fun it was to visit with you commissioners! So, I'll be seeing you soon! Cheesy potatoes, here we come!!

Ramona

Spring Regionals 2023

Your turn to share what's most important for your Region!

According to CDI Executive Director John Whitaker, the Spring Regional meetings now getting underway and running through mid-March are – for the first time – more about listening than lecturing. “What do you want CDI to do for you? What do you want from CDI? This is your chance to answer those questions,” says Whitaker.

“In the past, it's always been ‘Sit there and listen to us’. We're going to flip the script. We're going to sit there and listen to *you*. So with that, ‘What do you want to say to CDI?’ This is your opportunity to have CDI leadership sitting there taking notes, instead of you taking notes.” Each CDI Region has its own agenda this year, based on topics that regional directors submitted which they believe, based on district polling, to be their most important local issues. Leadership from NRCS and IDALS will also be offering programming and seeking input. Whitaker encourages commissioners and staff: “Make your plans to be heard – join your Spring Regional meeting!”

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

The “Call for Resolutions” has been sent to all the CAs, so please consider any issues you believe should be included as 2023 resolutions. Throughout the process, the resolutions committee has worked to increase the amount of time you have to submit and act on resolutions. This has shortened the time between preconference voting and annual conference but the result was record numbers of preconference votes being cast in 2022. There will be a little more time this year for consideration of agenda items and resolutions because the annual conference has been moved back a week to the fourth week of August. It will be held at the Gateway Center in Ames, August 28 and 29, 2023.

One of our CDI resolutions has been acted on by the Iowa House of Representatives. House File 282, originally HF 69, which adds the term ‘soil health’ along with the definition and related language passed the House on the 22nd. We are not always successful in having CDI resolutions acted on, so it is good to see action on at least one of them.

I hope you are planning to attend your spring regional meetings. I am looking forward to a good discussion of issues important to you.

Virtual testing runs March 13th through March 24th

Envirothon team registration deadline extended to March 3rd



The Iowa Envirothon is ON! And at CDI, we are happy to let you know **we are extending the deadline for registering teams to March 3rd**, to accommodate team organizers for this popular competition. The time is *now* for you as one of our youth leaders or as district staff and commissioners to bring together your local teams for a chance to win a day trip to Jester Park for the state competition, win cash prizes, and earn that free trip to Vancouver for the NCF International Envirothon Competition! 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.

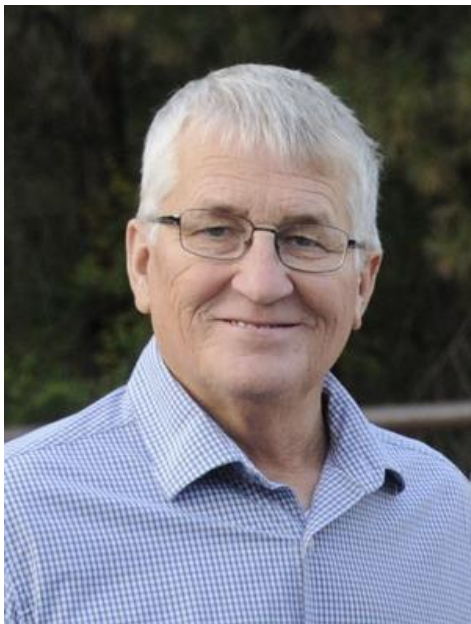
Virtual testing means less travel, less expense, more time for testing, and greater opportunities to achieve inclusivity for all our kids who would like to join the fun!

Envirothon virtual 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](#).

Nationwide management practice tool: Saving Tomorrow's Agricultural Resources (STAR)

By *Dennis Carney*
Past CDI President

Farmers and consumers are increasingly aware of and concerned about the consequences of commercial food, feed, and fiber production on our natural resources; and they are looking for a mechanism to measure these effects. [Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources](#) (STAR) is a FREE nationwide management practice tool designed to assist farm operators and landowners in evaluating their current practices on individual fields. Once practices on individual fields are evaluated, farm operators and landowners can then make any necessary adjustments to reduce nutrient loss, conserve soil, and enhance soil health.



Past CDI President Dennis Carney

STAR was developed in 2017 by Illinois' Champaign County Soil and Water Conservation District as a means to contribute to the important goals outlined in the state's Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy (NLRS). Since its creation, STAR has been adopted in many county soil and water conservation districts in Illinois, including several in Indiana. Other states have also adopted STAR, including Iowa, Missouri, and Colorado to administer the tool in their area, tailored to their local resource concern.

As the STAR program has grown, processors, ag suppliers, and end-users have responded to consumer demands for sustainable ag production by increasing their support for agriculture practices that improve soil and water quality. In the future, these purchasers may well offer incentives to producers who can prove their product was grown in an environmentally responsible manner.

The STAR evaluation system assigns points for management activities on an annual basis. Participants answer a series of simple questions about their crop rotation, tillage, nutrient applications, and use of conservation practices to generate their overall field score. STAR relies on the expertise of a local state science committee, comprised of farmers, conservation professionals, and university scientists, to assign point values to practices identified to address local resource concerns. Scores are converted to a STAR rating of 1 to 5, with 5 STARs indicating commitment to a suite of practices proven to improve soil health and water quality.

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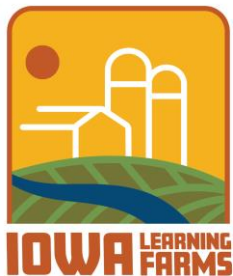
As the adoption of the STAR program has expanded, the need for a national STAR organization to ensure rating consistency across crops and production systems has grown. Work has been underway for several months on the organizational structure and makeup of this group; recently obtained funding will allow completion of this work. This oversight organization will be able to represent all the different state and local administering agencies in national level negotiations with end-users, consumer groups, STAR affiliates, and new groups that would benefit from STAR support and participation.

An additional benefit to the STAR program is that it provides landowners an easy method to ensure their valuable farmland is being farmed with the desired level of environmental awareness. A specific STAR rating that must be obtained as a condition of lease renewal can be included in the lease agreement, thus eliminating the need for a lengthy list of specific conservation practices to be followed. In addition, producers who are currently carrying high STAR ratings on their fields should attract additional land rental agreements from environmentally engaged landowners in their area.

In Iowa, the STAR program is administered through Conservation Districts of Iowa (CDI), an organization comprised of the state's 500 soil and water conservation district commissioners. Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) staff, and Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) employees administer a wide variety of cost share funds to implement conservation practices on private lands.

Iowa landowners and producers who are interested in the STAR program can go to <https://cdiowa.org> and look under the STAR tab for more information and the most current field form. You can fill out the form for one of your fields and click submit; upon review of entered data, CDI will inform you of your STAR rating. CDI re-evaluates the Iowa field form each year with science committee members to ensure that the most effective practices that result in improved soil health and water quality in the state are included.

This article originally appeared online in the ISU Extension and Outreach [Ag Decision Maker](#) website.



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.

March ILF Webinar Schedule

3/1: Justin Glisan, Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship
3/8: Adam Janke and Kay Stefanik, Iowa State University
3/15: Daniel Kaiser, University of Minnesota
3/22: Seth Watkins, Page County Farmer
3/29: Kara Salazar, Purdue University

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

2023 NACD Annual Meeting follow-up

Iowa's conservation voice in policy planning more critical now than ever

Iowa's SWCD representatives at the February NACD Annual Meeting in New Orleans acknowledge American agriculture is at a pivotal point in an evolving political, ecological, and global landscape. CDI President Ramona Nitz and CDI Vice President Jeri Thornsberry agree: Having Iowa at the table as policy is considered will be crucial for conservation.

"Agriculture is experiencing an inflection point – a time of significant change," says Thornsberry. "By 2050 the world's farmers need to raise 30% more food on fewer arable acres globally to feed a swelling population of up to 10 billion people."

Nitz believes that such challenges mean Iowa's role will be critical and Iowa's voice needs to be heard. "We are excited that we continue to be on our appointed committee – the legislative committee. We're hoping that stays because NACD has gone from five standing committees to three." At the moment, those seats on the NACD legislative include Iowa, but final appointments are not yet firm.

"Lobbying is the most important thing," says Nitz. "We have the Fly-In to Washington D.C. next month, where we'll meet with Iowa's congressional delegation. This all feels like it flows through the NACD legislative committee, things like farm bill recommendations and government affairs. To me that's important. Conservation is nothing without the funding." Iowa has two representatives on the House ag committee – 3rd District Representative Feenstra and 4th District Representative Nunn; Iowa senators Grassley and Ernst serve on the Senate ag committee. "We have a lot to talk to them about at the Fly-In. We'll talk Farm Bill and [review the policies NACD is putting forth](#) that we'd like to see in the Farm Bill."



CDI VP Jeri Thornsberry (left) and CDI President Ramona Nitz, representing Iowa at the NACD Board meeting in February.

That 2023 Farm Bill deliberation is of primary interest to soil and water conservation districts, says Thornsberry. "Currently the next 5-year Farm Bill is being negotiated with the most important part being a heavy emphasis on conservation practices. By the way, it is crucial to retain the Farm Bill funding base and not allow it to be reduced in reaction to the \$20B from the Inflation Reduction Act. If this happens, we have essentially lost \$20B in needed funding."

One happier highlight: Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack was the featured speaker. "Jeri and I met with Tom beforehand for a few minutes – and what did he want to talk about? Iowa women's basketball!" Before an audience of more than 800 people, Nitz said Vilsack urged unity at the agriculture policy level. "He said more than ever we need this 'strong partnership between the USDA and the conservation districts'," Nitz said, quoting Vilsack. "What he meant by that – with all this federal money on the table – we have to get that money working on the ground. There's a deadline, and we all are very concerned about that."

“My first in-person meeting!”

2023 NGLI Leadership Cohort in New Orleans

By Angela Rosol
Assistant Commissioner

Hello commissioners, I would like to provide a small report on my first in-person meeting as a member of the 2023 NGLI Leadership Cohort in New Orleans. My first impression is WOW! These people are amazing! We spent about twelve hours together in two days and really got to know the other leaders in the room. We all come from different areas with different concerns and goals but have one common theme, we want to leave the land a better place for our future, our legacy to the next generations.



2023 NGLI Leadership Cohort members (from left): Dawn Salcito, Arizona; Donnie Stephens, Oklahoma; Eric Hanson, South Dakota; Angela Rosol, Iowa; Mike Stewart, South Carolina; Craig Myers, North Carolina; Daryl Donohue, Kansas (NACD photo)

Our first sessions talked about leadership and learning our personalities. At first, I didn't know how this would help me be a better

leader. I now understand if you know who you are, how you lead, your personality type, this tells you how to interact with other people with similar and different personalities. We have all had encounters with different people in our conservation journey and a good leader learns how to make each interaction memorable for all.

We also had to explain our WHY, “just because I do” was not an acceptable answer. We had to really dig into this question and bring an item with us that explained our answer. Not one of us had the same answer, it was great to hear what drove people to do what they do. My items were pictures of my children and a race bib from a trail race I had done. I want to leave better land with so much life in the soil to them and also, I love wildlife and vibrant landscapes so when I am out training or racing or hiking with others and myself, we see amazing landscapes and I enjoy seeing the wildlife that is out there. I love to see the look on my children's face when they see something for the first time when we are out, or when I am out training, I might want to stop and take in my surroundings. I also hope to improve human/wildlife harmony so that we can enjoy the wildlife and maintain the hunting balance within our great state of Iowa.

Our next in-person meeting will be in Washington DC and then in Shepherdstown, WV with intense training on communicating with our elected officials and others, as well as many other skills to take back to our local, state and possibly someday to the national level. I look forward to letting you know what we encounter and some of the lifelong lessons we learn.

Your Friend in Conservation, Angela Rosol

NACD 2022 Hugh Hammond Bennett Award for Conservation

***Tama County farmer, CDI Region 7 Director Jack Boyer:
Honored for his commitment to a years-long conservation ethic***



CDI Region 7 Director Jack Boyer and NACD Hugh Hammond Bennett Conservation Award honoree

The name Jack Boyer is well-known by those involved in Iowa soil and water conservation – as Tama SWCD commissioner, CDI Region 7 Director, long-time voice for conservation practices and committed champion of soil health. That work has now earned Jack Boyer national notice (and not for the first time) at the February NACD Annual Meeting in New Orleans, where Boyer was honored with the “2022 Hugh Hammond Bennett Award for Conservation,” a nomination submitted by CDI Executive Director John Whitaker and the only Iowan so honored this year.

“I have the privilege of being the caretaker of a fourth generation Century Farm,” says Boyer. “My father-in-law, when he received the farm, he wanted to leave it in better shape than how he received it. My wife, Marion, and I share that philosophy and we want to leave it in better shape than when we received it.”

Boyer started with cover crops about 12 years ago. “The original incentive was that I raised seed corn and soybean on some of these fields and my father-in-law believed we had to pull out of the rotation every seven years, just to slow down the rate of decay it was doing to the land.” Boyer says learning about the goals of increasing organic matter and soil health fit well with economic self-interest. “If I didn’t have to pull out of the seed

corn rotation, there’s some financial incentive for me to do cover crops. So I did 50 acres out of a 160 and I saw some changes in that first year, one of them being infiltration. Second year I did another field, and I could look out across that field after it rained, and where the cover crops were, there was no pooling of water. But as soon as that cover crop ended, and the field was conventional, I saw water pools. And looking at the soil, I could see changes in the soil that was really encouraging to me.” In the next few years, as he started to see improvement in yields, “I went to 100 percent cover crop and haven’t looked back.”

After that success, he moved on to working with strip till and no-till. “I could do either one of those and I saw no yield degradation whatsoever, and actually saw some improvements by going to no-till. It was a transition, I didn’t do all fields at one time, but I’m now no-till and cover cop on every acre.” Boyer has since become known as a vocal advocate for these conservation practices, speaking to various farm groups, sharing his experience, including hard on-farm data to back up his claims. His efforts have won him recognition before, including NACD Soil Health Champion. “This Hugh Hammond Bennett award is based on my practice of what I have adopted and my promotion of those practices both within the soil and water conservation districts and the public in general. It’s an honor.”

Officers chosen during NACD Annual Meeting

New Leadership elected for the National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA)

New Orleans, LA - The National Conservation District Employees Association held its regular business meeting during the National Association of Conservation Districts Annual Meeting in New Orleans, LA, February 11-15. During the first business meeting, the NCDEA Board of Directors elected a new slate of officers for 2023. Newly elected officers include President, Melissa Higbee, Michigan; Vice President, Sarah Tunge, North Dakota; Secretary, Eric Shideler, Indiana; Treasurer, Gretchen Rank, Colorado and Member at Large, Mandy Parkes, California. The board also discussed increased member outreach and future grant opportunities. The board also heard from several partner organizations.

NCDEA Professional Development Committee hosted an event for employees attending the NACD Annual Meeting featuring four states that provide leadership training to supervisors and staff. Each of the represented states highlighted their programs, discussed how they are funded, and reviewed the criteria for admittance into the specific program. Attendees were able to ask the panel questions, and a lively discussion ensued. Following the session, staff were able to continue networking during the NCDEA Social hour. During this event, new Region Directors were introduced and given their Oath of Office. Newly installed Region Directors include Tami Moore, Northern Plains Director,



2023 National Conservation District Employees Association Executive Committee (L-to-R): Eric Shideler, Secretary, Indiana; Mandy Parkes, Member at Large, California; Gretchen Rank, Treasurer, Colorado; Sarah Tunge, Vice President, North Dakota; Melissa Hi (NCDEA photo)

South Dakota; Tanya Fell, Southwest Director, Colorado; Michael, Henn, Southwest Alternate, Wyoming; Jeff Parker, North East Director, New York; Sandy Thompson, Northeast Alternate, Pennsylvania; Eric Shideler, North Central Director, Indiana; Angela Warren, North Central Alternate, Michigan; Kelly Snoddy, Southeast Alternate, Virginia; Kayleigh Evans, Southeast Director, Kentucky; Mandy Parkes, Pacific Director, California; Vicki Carter, Pacific Alternate, Washington. The newly elected Executive Committee also took their Oath of Office for the 2023 term. Executive Director, Tim Riley, also recognized outgoing board members Rhonda Kelch, retiring President, and Velynda Parker, retiring Secretary.

The National Conservation District Employees Association was conceived in February 1984 and established in February 1992 by district employees with a passion for the local conservation delivery system. They recognized that district employees across the nation, at the direction of their local boards, are primarily responsible for the grassroots local delivery of conservation. NCDEA builds bridges to assist 7000+ district professionals in implementing conservation programs in their local communities. To learn more about NCDEA, visit www.ncdea.us.