

---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

It's that time of year when we all gather in Ames for our CDI Annual Conference. Have you registered yet? Your executive board and CDI staff have been hard at work, putting together a conference that will be a great experience for all!

The main event at annual conference is the annual business meeting. I am determined that this meeting will go more smoothly than it did last year when we had so many resolutions and by-law changes to consider. The main concern then was that so many people arrived late and we still allowed them to receive ballots for voting. This made the number required for passage change every few minutes! This will not be happening this year.

The meeting is scheduled to begin Monday morning at 9:00. If you do not have your ballots in hand by 8:55, you will not receive them and will be ineligible to vote. This means that you will have to be sure to be in line to register at the proper time. We will have extra people there this year to get you all registered. It's up to you to determine when you need to leave home to get in line in time. If you feel that you live too far away to get to the conference on time, please be aware that you are able to get a hotel room for the night before at no cost to you. That has always been the policy. Check the weather forecast. If there is a concern that weather may slow you down, please leave earlier to get to the conference on time. We want everyone to arrive safely and not have to hurry to get here. But we do need everyone here in time to be registered by 8:55.

We have a great lineup of speakers and breakout sessions this year. The ice cream social was such a big hit last year that it's been expanded for this year! And we have lots of door prizes! I mean, really nice "I hope they draw my name!" door prizes!! You don't want to miss out on this year's conference so get registered. I can't wait to see you!

Ramona

***CDI Annual Conference – August 28-29 – Gateway Center, Ames
Free for all commissioners/assistant commissioners! See page 3 for details.***

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

When my dad served as a Soil and Water Conservation Commissioner in the 1970s, I remember his attendance at the annual conference—not because I had to do the chores, but because the conference was held in Ames where my brother and I were students at Iowa State and dad stopped by to see us. I am looking forward to seeing many of you at the upcoming CDI Annual Conference August 28 and 29 in Ames. This year commissioners and assistant commissioners are eligible to win a \$100 door prize. Please plan to attend to learn what is happening in conservation in Iowa.

Other news...CDI has entered into an agreement with NRCS to provide clerical staff to the 25 NRCS resource teams in Iowa. The intent of this five-year agreement is to hire staff to do clerical tasks such as completing the required reconstitutions of farms including creating new file folders. Other duties may be identified by the District Conservationist in the offices. The agreement provides funding for CDI as well as offers an opportunity for local people who are looking for a good job. If you know of someone who would be interested in working with our great teams in our SWCD offices, please let them know that this job opportunity will be coming later this year.

CDI has also been asked to participate in two proposed NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) projects. Both projects aim at increasing cover crop planting in Iowa along with increasing use of no-till/strip-till and nutrient management practices. CDI is proposing our project which would support farmers producing our own cover crop seed. Once again, I urge you to register for your annual conference. We have designed this conference to provide more time for commissioners and assistant commissioners to speak what is on their minds. Registration is free and the food will be great. You may even win one of those door prizes!

Introducing the “Conservation Coffee” series

The NACD District and Partner Relations Committee is beginning a Conservation Coffee series! This is free and all are welcome, however, please register below to obtain the link and reminders. The first coffee will take place live on zoom on **August 10, 3 PM Eastern Time. Angela Rosol of Tripoli, Iowa will be the first presenter in the series** and she will speak on her experience with the Next Generation Leadership Institute.

Logistics and Presentation

We use zoom as the format

We will have roughly 15-20 minutes for an informal presentation, followed by Q&A.

Schedule: approximate

3:00 Eastern – Ariel and DPR Chair (Frank Williams) will provide an intro and welcome on behalf of NACD and the DPR Committee

3:05 – Presentation

3:20ish – Q&A

3:30 – Coffee ends

Audience

Typically, the audience is made of conservation districts, cities, NRCS and other partners, counties, etc. All are welcome!

Registration is free and open to anyone who has interest, please feel free to promote

widely:<https://nacdnet.app.neoncrm.com/np/clients/nacdnet/eventRegistration.jsp?event=1942&>

CDI Annual Conference August 28-29

Registration is open, the agenda is set, important business is ready for debate, discussion and policy resolutions await your input – with still plenty of time for meeting up with colleagues and friends, old and new! (Did we mention great food and comfortable accommodations?) (Special sponsor exhibits?) (Fun tours for your guests?) (*The Ice Cream Social!*) The 77th CDI Annual Conference, August 28-29, in Ames brings SWCD commissioners and assistant commissioners together with state partners for two days exchanging ideas vital to the future of Iowa soil and water quality – a true ‘It’s important you be there with us!’ event.

CDI Program Director Carlee Sabus, who is actively involved in the planning and coordination of this annual gathering, said this year will highlight communication between local SWCD leaders and government partners. “We heard some great exchanges during the Spring Regional meetings between our commissioners and partners, and we want to keep that conversation going,” said Sabus. “Secretary Naig will open Monday’s business meeting, which goes through noon. We have some important topics and resolutions to cover and vote on, so the best way to have your voice heard is to be there!”

***The conference is FREE, including lodging,
for commissioners and assistant commissioners***

Registering for the conference is easy and quick; early registration deadline is August 14th, cancel fees may apply after. To register: [CDI Annual Conference](#).

Silent Auction

This year’s annual conference will once again feature the “Silent Auction”, and Program Director Carlee Sabus encourages members to consider bringing items to include. “The money will be used for the scholarship program,” says Sabus. “We are asking folks to bring small items that we can have on the Silent Auction. Smaller items such as maple syrup or honey, or something along those lines. Fun and useful things!”

2023 Annual Conference Agenda

Monday August 28, 2023

- 7:00 am Registration opens
- 8:55 am Registration closes
- 9:00 am Welcome Secretary Naig opens the conference
- 9:15 am – 12:00 pm CDI Annual Business Meeting
- 12:00 pm – 1:00 pm Lunch and Presentation of Awards
- 1:00 pm – 1:30 pm Visit Exhibits
- 1:30 pm – 2:00 pm Ryan Britt NACD Farm Bill Updates
- 2:00 pm – 2:30 pm CDI Miscellaneous Business
- 2:30 pm – 3:00 pm Ice Cream Social
- 3:00 pm – 4:30 pm Propelling Conservation through Conversation 2.0 Commissioners and Partners general discussion exploring ways to increase commissioner’s involvement, sharing ideas to get new people involved with local SWCDs, suggesting ways to enhance commissioners and partners relations and sharing of local best practices for conservation events and district operations, etc.
- 4:30 pm – 5:30 pm Visit Exhibits and Social Hour (refreshments provided)
- 5:30 pm Dinner and Awards (Silent Auction ends)

Tuesday, August 29

- 7:00 am Buffet Breakfast begins with tables for Regions to gather for regional discussions
- 8:30 am – 10:00 am Partner updates and presentations — IDALS, NRCS, FSA, and IA DNR
- 10:00 am – 10:15 am Break and Visit Exhibits
- 10:15 am – 11:00 am Commissioner Training Refresh
- 11:00 am – 11:55 am Breakout Session – PL 566 Structures (legal issues, dam safety, and NRCS engineering)
- 11:00 am – 11:30 am Breakout Session – Climate Smart Farming
- 11:30 am – 11:55 am Breakout Session – Farm Bill Opportunities
- 12:00 pm Lunch and Awards

Dien Judge assumes new role on July 31st

CDI announces appointment of new Executive Director



New CDI Executive Director Dien Judge

The Board of Directors of the Conservation Districts of Iowa (CDI) announced the July appointment of Dien Judge to be the new CDI Executive Director, taking on the role for retiring Executive Director John Whitaker. Judge begins his leadership of CDI on July 31st.

CDI President Ramona Nitz said Judge, as the new Executive Director, brings valuable experience and skills to the position that will be of great service to Iowans during this time of change in rural and urban conservation policy. “Dien Judge has a very strong background in communicating – verbal or written – and that’s what we need. Communication is what we’ve been pushing the last two years of my administration at CDI – communication with the commissioners and with the partners, and we feel he’ll be very good at continuing our mission.”

Judge most recently served the people of southern Iowa for 10 years as the District Representative and Rural Policy Advisor for former Congressman Dave Loebsack, managing all aspects of federal constituent service in a multi-county region, advising the congressman on rural issues and agricultural policy, among other responsibilities.

His earlier professional experience include work as a reporter and news editor, as a financial assistant in the gubernatorial campaign of Chet Culver, appointments to serve as Monroe County Supervisor, and time with ADLM Emergency Management Agency as Emergency Management Coordinator. Nitz said that Judge’s background in policy and communication convinced the CDI board that Judge will help further the objectives of the CDI home office, which works with the elected commissioners of 100 Iowa Soil and Water Conservation Districts statewide. “Over the years, he’s been good at team building, and that’s important to us as well,” said Nitz. “This is why we’re excited with how we’re going to grow under his leadership.”

Outgoing Executive Director John Whitaker will remain active with CDI as advisor through the month of August – a period that includes the gathering of district commissioners for the 2023 Annual CDI Conference in Ames. Whitaker officially retires September 1st.

CDI Wildlife Specialist – ‘conservation salesman’

Partnering with local landowners to achieve habitat goals

A dilemma observed studying the Piping Plover along the Atlantic coast confirmed what much of Claire Helmke’s research had suggested: loss of habitat is a big part of what threatens wildlife – but humans are here, too: so where’s the middle ground? As the CDI Private Lands Wildlife Specialist in northwest Iowa, Claire says she’s committed to helping farmers and landowners find that middle ground.

“My work is focusing on helping the partner agencies help landowners figure out how to manage their land for habitat,” Helmke says. “A lot of my coworkers focus on soil control and cover crops; but when landowners come in and say, ‘Hey I’m thinking about doing a filter strip or a prairie strip,’ or ‘I want to do a new CRP planting for pollinators, or quail safe, one of the new programs’ – that’s when I jump in, and I usually have a fantastic time with landowners brainstorming ideas and working with them on how to bring what they want to life.”

Helmke joined CDI last fall as Wildlife Specialist for Plymouth, Cherokee, Monona and Woodbury. With a 2013 degree from Virginia Tech in Wildlife Science and a Master’s from Western Illinois University in Wildlife Biology, Claire spent her first professional years doing the “technician shuffle”, working in research programs for various state agencies and universities.

“I worked in the Rockies, the Midwest, up the East Coast and New York down to the Virginia area. Also in that time frame, I worked on projects having to do with population ecology and population demographics with threatened and endangered species.” That’s when she met the Atlantic Piping Plover, a small bird on that “threatened or endangered” list, with nesting habits along sandy beaches and tidal flats along the Atlantic Coast – competing for space on those beaches with humans. “It’s a big habitat focus” for the species, Claire says. “Sometimes the answer is more habitat – but people also want to live and recreate these same areas. Where is the middle ground of having both? It just really made clear in so many studies I was working on how much *habitat* is really playing the biggest role.”

What’s true along ocean coasts is true in mid-America agricultural fields. As a CDI Wildlife Specialist, “How can I help bring more habitat into an area – but it’s not a goal of ‘let’s just put habitat everywhere!’, because we also need land for agriculture. What I wanted to do is find that middle ground of ‘how do we have enough habitat, how do we have enough connectivity for pollinators, for migrating bird species, for running deer movement and pheasant movement – how do we have that while still providing the agriculture sector for the country and globally?”



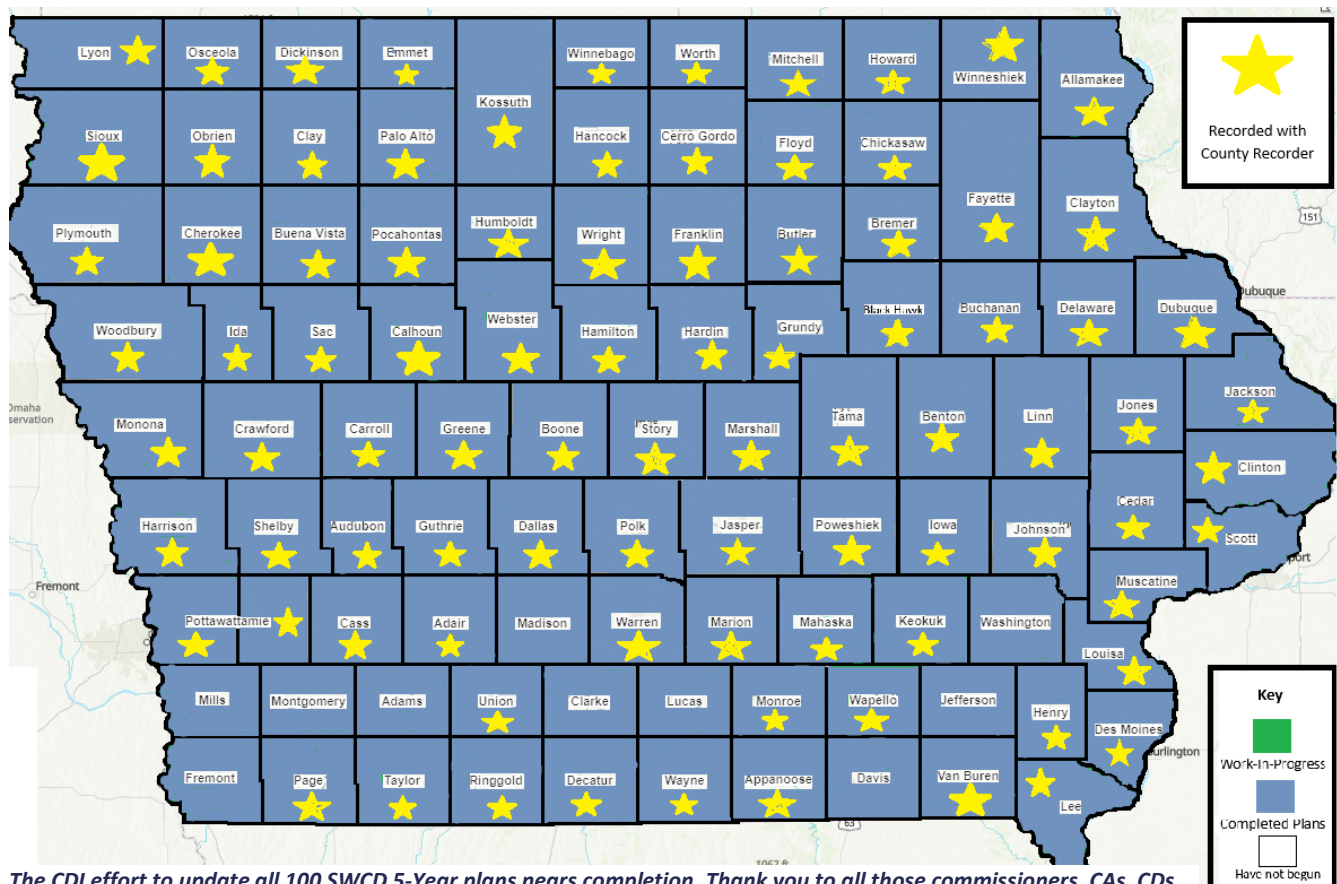
CDI Wildlife Specialist Claire Helmke

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Her workday is a double-focus of helping landowners with projects they may have in mind, and of letting other landowners know help – and financial resources to make it happen – is available. “There’s a lot more people out there who are interested in doing something conservation-minded, they just don’t know that resources are available, and they’re always so amazed when they realize there is help out there for them, there is someone who wants to help them find the answers. So we’re really just another partner in the grand interconnected partnership available to help.

“The days when I’m overwhelmed with how much I love my job are the days I get to work with landowners who are just so excited to do their own project. A lot of what I do as kind of a ‘conservation salesman’ is not only trying to help landowners decide how to do a certain planting but also finding out how to get the money to help them do certain conservation work. So when I find a landowner who’s come to us with ‘I’ve been doing this, I have this property, I have this goal, I don’t know how to do it, can you help?’ – Yes, I can help, let’s make this partnership happen and let me get you some money to help with that, too, so you can do even more! Remember that a lot of what we’re trying to do working with landowners – whether it’s a wildlife specific program or if it’s an agricultural crop specific program – we’re trying to help build new management practices that are going to have lasting effects. There are such strong traditions in this part of the country of doing things a certain way. But we’re constantly learning new ways, constantly learning new technologies, and it takes some time to get the message out to everybody. But it’s happening!”

5-Year “Soil and Water Resource Conservation Plan” update



The CDI effort to update all 100 SWCD 5-Year plans nears completion. Thank you to all those commissioners, CAs, CDs, local staff and citizens who have made this important project to keep conservation momentum moving forward statewide a success!

Iowa Project AWARE completes second decade of volunteer river cleanup events

CDI SW Planner takes time off to fill canoe with garbage

If you hear Shaun Ahern talking trash to you ... thank him! As a Project Coordinator for Golden Hills RC&D and the CDI Planner for Southwest Iowa, Shaun already has conservation-cred. And he added to that again in mid-July, joining more than 300 volunteers on a weeklong river cleanup, pulling trash into his canoe along a 58-mile course of the Iowa River. “Everyone gets on a river in a canoe, floats down gathering trash from the shore and on the river,” explains Ahern. “Anything you find that would be considered discarded trash – scrap metal, tires, appliances, you name it.”



CDI SW Planner Shaun Ahern

The event is sponsored by [Iowa Project AWARE](#), now in its 20th year of planning and coordinating an annual river cleanup in the state. According to Lynette Seigley, who has been with Project AWARE since its beginning in 2003, the float is more than clearing away garbage. “It’s not just a cleanup,” says Seigley. “I think the cleanup is just an avenue to the educational piece, where we include programs throughout the week that sort of highlight what makes that watershed, the communities, the river unique.”

For Shaun Ahern, those educational sessions are a great way to end a hard day on the river. “It’s a volunteer event, but kind of like a vacation, too,” he says. “They have locations ready each day and people camp there, where we hear organized speakers and activities that are educational, historical, or biological that are specific to that region you’re in.” This is the fourth year Ahern has joined this river cleanup project.

As Seigley explains, the event was originally sponsored by DNR. “Brian Soenan and I were DNR employees with the water monitoring program. So we were looking for another way to engage people in Iowa, connect them to water resources, and we had seen Chad Pregracke with Living Lands & Water talking about his efforts to clean up the Mississippi River, and he really inspired Brian to pose the idea of doing a river cleanup in Iowa, and that’s really where it started.” With the full support of DNR, Soenan and Seigley launched their first float in 2003.

“We decided to do a weeklong event, so it gives people a chance to experience more than just a few miles of the river and to see how it changes as you float down river.” What began as an Iowa DNR event today operates through a nonprofit organization known as N-Compass, Inc. Major partners include the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and the State Hygienic Laboratory at The University of Iowa.

In the July cleanup along the Iowa River, 315 volunteers (including people from 12 other states) pulled 10.7 tons of trash and recyclables from the waters and banks. The City of Ames Resource Recovery Facility and other recycle facilities helped in the recycle effort, and the volunteers were able to recycle 96% this year. “It’s important for creating awareness for people of the condition of Iowa’s rivers,” Seigley says. “As you travel across the state, you go across bridge crossings, over rivers and streams all over the place and you get a small glimpse of what those rivers look like. But it’s not until you travel down the river do you really see what’s happening.”



Volunteers during July cleanup of Iowa River (Photo: Iowa Project AWARE)

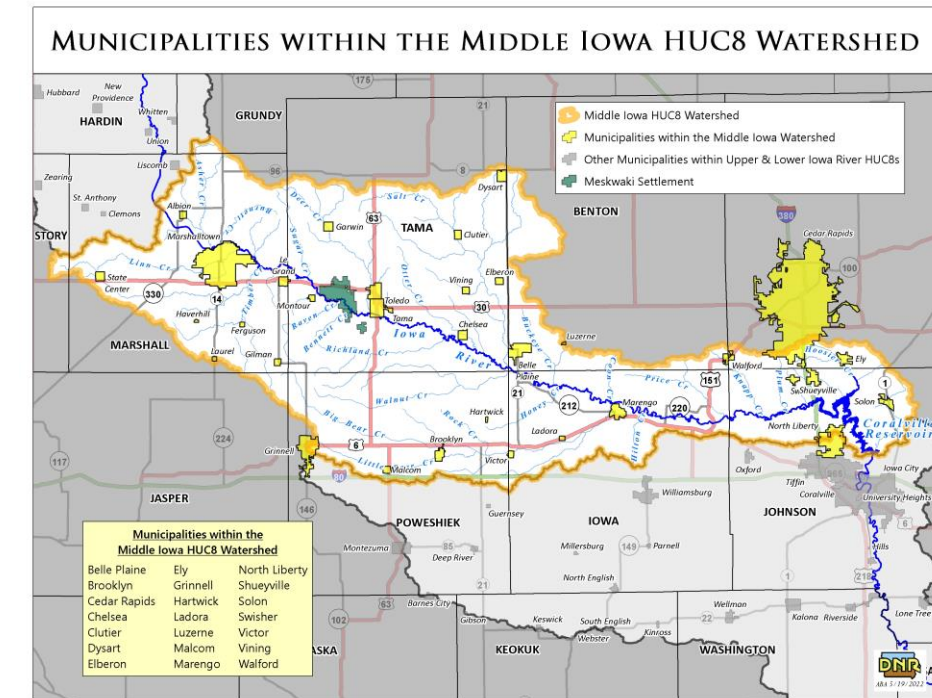
Shaun Ahern says his only regret is not knowing about Iowa Project AWARE sooner. His first volunteer effort was in 2017. “I really appreciate giving back to help cure the watershed, getting stuff out of there that shouldn’t be there. It’s something you can tangibly do to improve the watershed.” There he goes again ... talking trash. Thanks Shaun!

Middle Iowa River watershed gains WMA status

Stakeholders from the middle section of the Iowa River Watershed recently formed the Middle Iowa Watershed Management Authority (MIWMA), a cooperative agreement among local governments to address watershed issues. According to Jennifer Fencel, the purpose of Iowa’s newest WMA is to coordinate local, state

and regional resources and leverage funding for improving water quality and mitigating the impacts of flooding. Fencel is Director, Environmental Services Department, East Central Iowa Council of Governments ([ECICOG](#)). The agreement became official on June 30.

“We started a year ago with organizational and informational meetings in Tama County,” Fencel said. “We reached out, did a survey of all potential members. By code, the cities, counties and SWCDs are the political subdivisions that are eligible to form a 28E agreement to form a WMA. We did presentations; people were interested, wanted to



Map courtesy of Andy Asell, DNR. [Click here for expanded version.](#)

know more, and we met with some SWCDs.” There are 10 counties, 33 cities, and 10 SWCDs eligible to join the MIWMA. Fencel noted the MIWMA is a completely voluntary organization with no authority over any jurisdiction.

“It’s a new way of thinking about how we all cooperate,” Fencel said. “Typically, you’ve got counties doing their thing, like drainage on county roads; the cities might be working on storm water management; and the rural areas have their water concerns they may take to district commissioners – and you really haven’t had cross-over. Now (through the WMA) it allows for cities to literally invest in projects outside their jurisdiction but in areas that impact them because of the water runoffs and nutrients or bacteria. We haven’t had that connection.”

Fencel said concerns arose around sediment and nutrient loads at Coralville Lake, located at the bottom of the watershed. Interest grew among local city, county and SWCD leaders to form a WMA. “Johnson County agreed to allocate some of their ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) money toward watershed management, and that really made this possible. This opens communication with local government leaders, and also brings other funding sources in play that they wouldn’t normally go for.” The MIWMA is the 28th WMA in Iowa, but only one of two to form recently. “As local governments continue to see more extreme weather events, there’s an amazing amount of funding coming through the federal Infrastructure Bill, coming through Inflation Reduction Act, and from newer state funding. The combination means there are more opportunities for resources.”