

---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:

President: Jeri Thornsberry
Vice-President: Don Elsbernd
Treasurer: Jack Boyer
Secretary: Paul Ackley
Past President: Ramona Nitz

CDI OFFICE STAFF:

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From: Outgoing CDI President Ramona Nitz

As your immediate past president, I'd like to take this chance to tell you all what an honor it has been to be your CDI president for the last two years. Having been elected during COVID, I was quite unsure what to expect these two years to be like. It turns out that they were filled with "back to business as usual" for the most part. Districts went back to having in-person meetings, we held our Spring Regionals, we met for our Annual Conference and I was able to travel to represent our state at the NACD meetings. For all of this, I am very grateful.



Annual Conference guest tour

I am most grateful, however, for the wonderful people I have had the opportunity to work with- the commissioners throughout the state, the CDI Board of Directors, the CDI executive board, our CDI staff, Secretary Mike and the folks at IDALS, NRCS and the State Committee. At the national level, I've worked with people from all over the country as I sat on the Legislative Committee and the North Central Region board. From all of these individuals, I have learned so much. I feel very fortunate. It will be my pleasure to continue to serve on the executive board with officers from whom I will continue to learn. I look forward to seeing all you commissioners in the future and, if invited, I will be happy to travel to your districts and represent your state organization, CDI. We continue to be here to support you in any way we can.

Ramona

Executive Director Report – Dien Judge

I'd like to start out and just say a big "thank you" to everyone who worked so hard to put together our annual conference. Since I began my duties here at CDI on July 31, it's been full-steam ahead every day with planning and organization for the conference, and all of that hard work really paid off. We had a great group of dedicated folks who came together in Ames, eager to learn and meet others who are passionate about soil and water conservation.

I'm happy to have been able to start this job at such a hectic time, as it has given me the chance to quickly develop an understanding of the scope and impact of this organization. The annual conference planning process involves making connections between the board of directors, commissioners, our amazing staff and so many of our partner organizations. This event is a collaboration, much like the work of SWCD offices and their efforts every day to make Iowa a better place.

As I've worked here at CDI over the last few weeks, I've often reminded myself of the purpose of this organization. The mission of CDI is: *Conservation Districts of Iowa informs, educates and leads Iowans through our local soil and water conservation districts to promote conservation of natural resources.* The mission statement says it very clearly: we inform, educate and lead. And I believe we can always make a bigger impact if we organize and work together toward a common purpose. It is the collaboration between our key partners and all the other important organizations that will bring us success. We must find ways to work together to get our important work done.

Starting a new job is always a challenge, but so many of you have made my first few weeks on the job a lot of fun. Thanks to all of you. I want to personally thank John Whitaker for mentoring me through this past month, as his help has been invaluable.

Thornsberry and Elsbernd take on roles as new CDI leadership

Jeri Thornsberry begins her new role as President of CDI, running unopposed in voting at the 2023 CDI Annual Conference in Ames (see page 3). Thornsberry – of Black Hawk SWCD – most recently served two terms as CDI Vice President, is well-known for initiating and promoting successful conservation projects, and has long been active in CDI leadership positions. Don Elsbernd – Allamakee SWCD and CDI Region 4 Director – was voted by conference commissioners to join Thornsberry as CDI Vice President. Elsbernd and wife Trish are long-time no-till/strip-till corn and soybean farmers near Postville. Elsbernd was previously recognized as an "NACD Soil Health Champion", which honors producers who practice and promote good soil health management. Each serves two one-year terms in their new leadership positions.



CDI President Jeri Thornsberry and Vice President Don Elsbernd

Conservation Districts of Iowa 77th Annual Conference: “Moving Forward Together!”

“Never been more done for conservation than today.”

With the conference theme “Moving Forward Together!”, district commissioners from across Iowa came together for our 77th CDI Annual Conference this week at the Gateway Center in Ames and took advantage of interaction and discussion with colleagues who share a common commitment to conservation yet have wide differences in local challenges and concerns. The message to take home, according to featured speaker Ag Secretary Mike Naig: “There has never been more done for conservation than today.” Naig – addressing the commissioners as “advocates and advisors for water quality” – noted our goals take years of sustained effort. “We do have momentum in every category” of conservation. “What does it take? At its core: people.”



Featured speaker, Iowa Ag Secretary Mike Naig



Executive Director Dien Judge (seated) listening as outgoing director John Whitaker addresses conference.

On day one of the two-day conference, attendees held a unique open-mic forum – “Propelling Conservation through Conversation” – that encouraged a give-and-take between partners, CDI leadership and commissioners. Day two featured updates from federal and state partners, and a “[Commissioner Enrichment](#)” session, covering responsibilities and authorities of a district commissioner.

Said CDI Lobbyist Jim Obradovich: serving as a district commissioner is “your chance to be stewards of that amazing gift we’re given – soil and water that is the envy of the world. Policy folks recognize that. Your authority is authentic.” This conference also recognized the passing of the torch from now-

former CDI Executive Director John Whitaker to now-current Executive Director Dien Judge.



CDI staff welcome conference attendees. (l-r) Claire Helmke, Allison Earl, Alyssa Comer

Business Meeting Voting Results

Commissioners representing 50 Iowa SWCDs (and 116 proxy votes from those commissioners voting but who could not attend) gathered on the morning of day one to consider a number of resolutions, leadership and financial reports, and elect leadership for the next year. Running unopposed, Vice President Jeri Thornsberry was elevated to President Thornsberry, and CDI Region 4 director Don Elsbernd was re-elected vice president by secret ballot (See page 2). Of eight resolutions that required debate, two were passed by vote: “Increase Cover Crop Share for Previous Users” (77.2% approval), and “Change Policy Within the Federal Historic Preservation Act” (81.2% approval). One resolution was withdrawn because sponsor district was absent, and five resolutions failed.

Snapshots

A walk-around view of Annual Conference action



Award winner photos will be available soon on the CDI website. For more "conference action", check out [this two-minute video](#).



One Water: CDI Poster Finalists Head for National Contest!

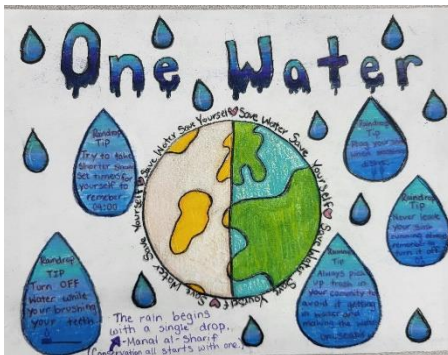
CDI Regional Directors selected the winning Iowa entries for the 2023 “CDI Poster Contest” during Annual Conference – always a tough selection to make from among the many quality entries. CDI Regions 7 and 9 dominated the final winners (which included one tie). Youth statewide entered their ideas for promoting this year’s theme: **“One Water”**. The board chose one state winner from each of the five grade categories from regional winners. The five state winning posters will be sent to the NACD-sponsored national poster contest for consideration for a national award. Thank you to all our Iowa youth poster artists! We thank Grinnell Mutual for sponsoring the event, that includes cash prizes to the selected artists.



K-1 Vy Odell, Muscatine SWCD



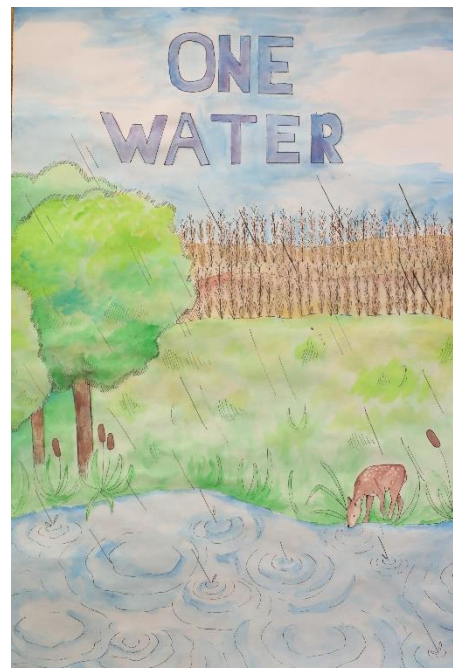
2-3 Lillia Benner, Tama SWCD



4-6 Gianna Nietzel, Muscatine SWCD



10-12 Imigyn Stratton, Keokuk SWCD



7-9 Oliver Thomas, Keokuk SWCD

Q&A with out-going Executive Director John Whitaker

What do you believe is ahead — near term or longer — for the Conservation Districts movement in Iowa?

I think there's going to be an increased emphasis on soil health and climate smart farming over time. One of the things that USDA had noticed in the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act: farmers are stepping up. They have a waiting list for a lot of the type of programs that NRCS offers. And getting that waiting list whittled down and then being able to go out and promote it to more middle adopters is going to make a long-term change. As people start to drive by their neighbors and see this and say, "That looks good!" — and when they see the profit aspect of it, there's going to be more and more inquiries. And one of the keys to all of that goes back to Hugh Hammond Bennet, when he said that conservation districts is the most important step in the history of soil conservation. Local folk out there being conservation leaders.

Are there ways district commissions could raise their awareness locally, make their presence and work better known in their communities?

One of the things that I particularly would like to see commissioners doing — and I'm not going to be a commissioner myself — but I wouldn't mind hosting field days sometime to show good conservation on the ground. A lot of that's done through Practical Farmers of Iowa, that's a good way for commissioners to do that. But



John Whitaker awarded "Honorary Member" during Annual Conference

"I feel like I'm leaving CDI in good hands. I know the leadership on the board, I know the leadership in the office — both Dien and Carlee. CDI is in good hands."

John Whitaker

commissioners could do field days on their own. Bring people out to the farm and show them no-till, show them cover crops, show them what soil health does. I think that commissioners showing off, having articles in the newspaper, are excellent ways of furthering that movement, and furthering their own local work. I don't think in urban communities, when people see landscape planting, when they see rain gardens and things that the commissioners are involved in, I don't think they realize where that's

coming from. I think they believe it's just a good city project and their city is being civic-minded or climate-minded. In any of those situations where the districts are involved, they need to put a sign on that: 'This is a project spearheaded by your local SWCD'.

One significant program during your tenure was CDI's responsibility to facilitate 5-year SWRCP approvals statewide, now nearing successful completion; could you give us your estimation of how that went, why it was important, and what's next for districts regarding their SWRCP?

The thing about the entire SWRCP process was: Covid cut our hearts out. Right in the middle of that, it becomes difficult to get the plans done. The planners stepped up, the districts stepped up, and probably the biggest learning experience out of that was: the success of having facilitators going around working with these districts to facilitate the local work groups and the public meetings — they were key to getting input. So I think having facilitators on staff at CDI long-term to work with districts would be a positive benefit, and we are working toward that goal. It's been a positive experience. As one commissioner said, 'In the end it was a process, but the process was priceless.' So that long-range 5-year planning, if we could take that Midwest-wide, nation-wide, that movement could be key to increasing soil health and key to using agriculture to fight this extreme weather we're having.

There are some remarkable developments coming soon at CDI — can we say, "big changes are coming"?

We can say 'big changes are coming'! We're going to add a significant number of staff to help one of our partners, NRCS. We have a signed agreement, it's just in the final processing. We're going to have 25 new staff out in the field. Yes, they work directly with NRCS, but they are there because of the districts, and they are going to help all partners get more conservation on the ground. And that's the key to the Inflation Reduction Act, is to get more conservation on the ground, more year-round living roots in the ground, and less water quality issues in Iowa. And that's what we're going to get from that. So it's going to be a huge enhancement to the partnership, a huge benefit to CDI and to the districts. I feel like I'm leaving CDI in good hands. I know the leadership on the board, I know the leadership in the office — both Dien and Carlee. CDI is in good hands. I'm not uncomfortable leaving because I know that the work we do will be carried on.

New cover crop survey challenges assumptions

A new national cover crop survey report released today challenges assumptions on the role of incentive payments in cover crop adoption. Incentives play a key role in getting some farmers started on cover crops—49% of the cover crop users participating in the survey reported receiving some sort of payment for cover crops in 2022, and 77.8% of cover crop non-users said incentive payments would be helpful. However, 90.3% of the farmers who were receiving cover crop incentives reported that they would definitely or probably continue planting cover crops after the payments ended, while only 3.3% said they definitely or probably would drop cover crops at the end of the incentive program.

In all, just 15.6% of cover crop users said receiving incentive payments was one of their goals for cover cropping.

These findings were among many conclusions drawn in a report -- [National Cover Crop Survey Report 2022-2023](#) – issued jointly by the USDA-NIFA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) and the American Seed Trade Association (ASTA), based on insights from nearly 800 farmers in 49 states.

"Some people mistakenly assume that farmers only stick with cover crops because of payments, but this year's National Cover Crop Survey provided a very different perspective," says Dr. Rob Myers of SARE, lead researcher on the 2022-2023 National Cover Crop Survey Report.

"What the survey showed is that cover crop incentive payments are an important factor in encouraging and helping farmers to transition into cover cropping, but once they see the soil health improvements and other cover crop benefits, most stick with cover crop planting long after the incentives end," Myers notes.

This article is an edited version of a press release from USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program, the Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC), and the American Seed Trade Association (ASTA).

[Click here For the complete article.](#)

The current report summarizes data from 795 farmers divided into user and non-user groups. Among the findings in this year's survey:

- Cover crop users participating in the survey—including producers of grain, other commodities, and horticultural crops—planted an average (mean) of 413.6 acres of cover crops in 2022. Cover crop acreage has been increasing steadily since the first survey in 2012.
- Cover crops continued to show benefits for corn and soybean yields for experienced users of cover crop. The farmers with 10 or more years of cover crop experience had yield gains of 6.30% on soybeans and a similar 6.27% on corn.
- Farmers with two years or less of cover crop experience had modest soybean yield gains of 3.37% following cover crops; for those inexperienced cover crop users, average corn yields were not statistically different between cover crops and no cover crops.
- Improved soil health was a key goal for 95% of the cover crop users and a high-priority research item for 87%.
- Though 91% of cover crop users selected "add soil organic matter/sequestering carbon" as a key priority, just 16% of the users in the survey who received payments in 2022 reported participating in a carbon market program.
- One in four respondents integrated livestock into their cover crop program. Of those who grazed cover crops, 76% reported a net increase in profit from the practice.



Iowa Learning Farms Webinars

We encourage staff and commissioners 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.

9/6: Jeff Strock, University of Minnesota

9/13: Nathan Nelson, Kansas State University

9/20: Julia Brittes Tuthil, Iowa State University

9/27: Daniel Kirby, Iowa Department of Natural Resources

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

Watershed coalition and state conservation agencies invite district commissioners to Salt Lake for early October annual meeting

The National Watershed Coalition and National Association of State Conservation Agencies Annual Meetings will be held in Salt Lake City, October 1-4. See below for NWC agenda and information. Register for the Annual Meeting in Salt Lake City, UT at [In-Person Session Registration Link](#), and register for lodging at the Radisson Hotel Salt Lake City Downtown at [Register Link for Lodging](#).



We need to talk

About USDA Watershed Program Challenges and Opportunities:

Thank you for joining the conversation at the

National Watershed Coalition National Meeting

We'll discuss

- Agency leadership changes
 - More funding opportunities for sponsors
- New Farm Bill with potential to change key elements of the Program
 - Old and new, traditional and non-traditional stakeholders
- Frequency, severity, and unpredictability of extreme weather events
 - Applying new technologies to address common O&M problems
- Finding and developing new watershed program sponsor leadership



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