

---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: President Jeri Thornsberry

A month has passed since our 77th annual conference and I wanted to recap some highlights. 83 commissioners and 16 assistant commissioners from 50 districts attended. These numbers are up from last year. This year the entire conference program was based on feedback we received. Not long ago you received a conference evaluation. It would be good for everyone to share your thoughts about how we can continue to improve our conference as we move forward together.

Commissioners voted on 12 resolutions this year and on three resolutions to archive. Commissioners in attendance (83) voted along with 115 validated proxies. Three approved resolutions were referred to the State Soil and Water Conservation Committee (commonly known as the State Committee) and two will be referred to the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) for consideration of federal policy changes. (*See summary of resolutions voting results, p. 3.*)

An essential thing we commissioners must remember is that before CDI officials can lobby the legislature, a bill must be drafted and presented to the Iowa legislature. What that means for the fate of resolutions approved by more than 60% of Iowa SWCD commissioners may ultimately depend on one significant thing: The importance of commissioners talking to their local legislators. We commissioners must engage local legislators more often than is currently done. It would be good to meet with them in the Fall before the session begins to talk with them about conservation issues. Then invite them to meet with you at Partnership Day at the Capitol scheduled for Thursday, February 8, 2024. It is not too early to get this date on their calendars and on yours.

As many of you have heard, the State Committee is on the Governor's list for review and possible diminishment of responsibilities. Each of you will soon receive talking points about this effort. Please contact your elected state officials and speak to them about the value of this State Committee.

Harvest has begun in many parts of Iowa. Please be careful!

Executive Director Report – Dien Judge

We at Conservation Districts of Iowa are closely monitoring a recommendation made this week by the state’s Boards and Commissions Review Committee. I thought I’d take this opportunity to provide an update on this process.

The Boards and Commissions Review Committee held its final meeting this week and approved its report, which has been delivered to the Governor and Legislature. You may recall that the State Soil Conservation and Water Quality Committee (SSCWQC) is among a long list of boards and commissions that have been under review for possible changes or elimination.

This week’s report recommends that the SSCWQC: “...should provide expert advice and consultation; however, the Committee should not have rulemaking or policymaking functions over a division of the Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, which should be transferred to the Department and the Secretary.”

Conservation Districts of Iowa previously submitted a letter opposing changes to the current responsibilities and powers of the SSCWQC. While we are pleased to see that the report does not recommend the outright elimination of the SSCWQC, we will continue to monitor this process closely. In its current form, the SSCWQC establishes policies for the administration of the Division of Soil Conservation & Water Quality programs and approves rules of the Division prior to adoption. They also develop and recommend an annual budget for the Division in addition to providing a forum for the discussion of soil conservation and water quality issues and the development of policy and program initiatives.

The SSCWQC is authorized under Iowa Code and consists of nine voting members appointed by the Governor, geographically distributed across the state with three members representing the constituencies of tree farming, the mining industry and cities.

The SSCWQC has always worked well with Conservation Districts of Iowa, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, and the Governor to develop policies that improve soil conservation and water quality. It’s just not necessary to make changes to the committee’s responsibilities. We will continue to work with our lobbyist, Jim Obradovich, and we’ll keep you posted regarding our plan for making your voices heard throughout this process.

NRCS Funding Available for Quail Habitat Practices in Southern Iowa

Conservationists with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) are encouraging Iowa landowners with marginal cropland or land adjacent to trees, brush and pasture to seed down native warm-season grasses to benefit the northern bobwhite quail and other wildlife. Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), NRCS has about \$1.2 million available to landowners in [35 southern Iowa counties](#) to implement quail habit-improving practices, such as conservation cover, brush management, upland wildlife habitat management, early successional habitat management, and tree and shrub establishment.

Sam Adams, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs in Iowa, says landowners can apply any time for EQIP conservation practice funding at their local NRCS office. The first cutoff to apply for Iowa NRCS programs for fiscal year 2024 is Nov. 3. Northern bobwhite quail habitat has decreased by 30 million acres nationwide due to a rise in cattle grazing non-native forage like fescue and advanced agricultural equipment that leaves fewer weeds and brush. Quail populations have decreased by 80 percent the past 60 years.

Darrell Geib, Area Resource Conservationist for NRCS in Atlantic, says it is important for landowners to sign up early this year. “We want to give our conservation planners time to work with landowners on habitat development this fall,” he said. “Areas adjacent to CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) ground and old pastures will be prime locations for these practices.” To help reconnect cattle and quail, NRCS is working with producers to manage for native warm-season grasses that create productive and palatable grazing options for livestock while benefitting quail and other wildlife species. Common native warm-season grasses include switchgrass, big bluestem, eastern gamagrass, and Indiangrass. In addition to improving soil and water quality, warm-season grasses can boost livestock productivity and provide habitat for pollinators. Visit the [NRCS website](#) for more information about practices to help restore quail habitat. To apply for program funding, visit your [local NRCS field office](#).

CDI 2023 District-Approved Resolutions

“Resolved...”: our next steps in Iowa policymaking

Iowa SWCD commissioners spoke their minds with a vote, both in pre-conference and after lively floor debate during the CDI 2023 Annual Conference held in August. Those votes determined the ‘thumbs up or down’ fate of resolutions presented by individual districts for consideration by their statewide fellow commissioners. CDI resolutions put the full weight of an elected body behind calls for government action and policy change. But once that resolution is approved – what happens next?

“If resolutions have a state significance, they’ll be formally presented to the State Soil Conservation & Water Quality Committee,” says CDI Executive Director Dien Judge. “If there are other state agencies that they should go before, we’ll take them before that. If they have federal significance, then we’d move them along to the NACD to see if NACD will adopt them.”

Iowa SWCDs considered 12 resolutions in pre-conference voting. Three passed and one failed because it did not reach the required 60% approval and therefore failed; and eight resolutions received more than 50% positive votes, but less than 60%, and were then presented for debate at the

August conference in Ames. Of those eight resolutions to be discussed, two were approved, five failed and one was withdrawn as a commissioner from the authoring district was not present. Three resolutions were approved to be archived during the business meeting. These resolutions were previously approved at least five years ago and is required to be reviewed by commissioners to either continue to leave as a policy or to archive it either because the issue has been resolved or it is no longer relevant. [See attached document “2023 Resolutions Voting Results.”](#)

A total of five resolutions passed – three during pre-conference voting and two at the business meeting. CDI President Jeri Thornsberry referred the three resolutions dealing with state issues to the State Soil and Water Conservation Committee (commonly known at the State Committee) for review and support. Two require review at the federal level as a change in policy is required. These will be referred to the Legislative Committee of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD).



Commissioners debate, vote on resolutions at Annual Conference in August.

In case you missed it ... (or want to review again!)

A presentation made during the CDI Annual Conference by a team of CDI leadership and Regional Directors is available for your review. [Click here to download the “Commissioner Enrichment” PowerPoint](#), offering insights into critical district commissioner duties, partners, state codes, and more!

Story SWCD named outstanding SWCD for 2023

Keeping proactive focus on outreach, relationship-building

With a focus on relationship-building, celebrating local producers, inter-government partnering and embracing innovation, the Story SWCD earned top conservation district honors at the recent CDI 2023 Annual Conference award presentation. According to Story SWCD Chair Kayla Bergman, the recognition is a tribute to her district commission's persistent approaches to promoting conservation.



Story SWCD accepting award during Annual Conference (l-r): Commissioners Steve Riggins, Kayla Bergman, Alisha Bower, Selden Spencer.

"As a district, we are thinking beyond just cost-share programs," says Bergman. "Instead of just coming together monthly and approving applications and hearing from NRCS, we're thinking about how to be proactive and get the word out there about the opportunity to invest in conservation."

Among a wide scope of programs and projects that won the district the "Paul Johnson Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Award", the conference honor noted: partnering with two local farmers doing conservation practices who hosted field days focused on cover crops; the employment of an ISU student intern to do outreach and recruitment among local producers; sharing regular updates in the local press; support of

non-profit organizations related to water quality monitoring; partnering with WMAs; awarding a locally-

funded scholarship to a college-bound ag and environmental science communications student – and especially encouraging, the district's third year of edge of field practices through 'batch & build' projects, growing from five landowners in 2021 to 40 in 2022. "I would say that being the second county in the area to adopt the batch and build is absolutely a success – success we're not having on our own, we're partnering with Story County and the Dept of Ag," Bergman says. "We have a really unique relationship with the City of Ames through that project, so they're utilizing the batch and build as a cost-savings for them with nutrient trading, but then we are – as a district thinking about rural landowners – providing the other piece to that in the partnership. That's been a really good relationship for us."



Rainfall simulator demonstration.

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Recent Story SWCD-sponsored cover crop field day, Brian Sampson farm (standing at left).

The district is actively involved with the watershed authority for Ioway Creek and Headwaters of the South Skunk WMAs in Story County. “I know that that structure has worked really well to bring local governments together, and we have found value in being active participants in those WMAs,” says Bergman. “Being part of the planning process and now getting some projects on the ground – it’s really powerful to have local governments come together like that.”

Of particular importance, though, is lifting up those producers of Story County who make that commitment to engage conservation, she says. “We have found success in lifting up those farmer-leaders, so we actually give an award locally to farmers implementing cover crops for the first time in recognition for that effort.” Multiple local farmers receive the recognition every year, awarded in honor of the late Steven Fales, a former Story SWCD commissioner. “Iowa farmers are so humble, so it’s amazing to see how humble they are through that award process when we think about the hours and days of work that it takes to add some of these conservation practices.”

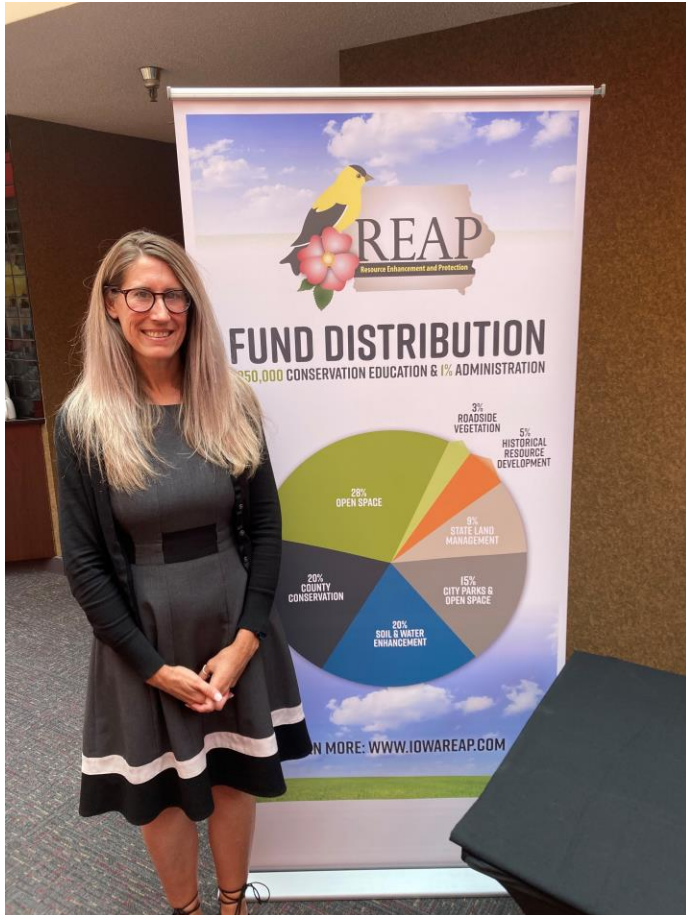
The emphasis on outreach and embracing relationships is key. “We couldn’t have success as a district on our own, so we really have leaned into partnerships. As the chairperson of the district, I have really shown it’s beneficial to have conversations with our partners outside monthly meetings to understand how we can be helpful, and when there is an opportunity to dive into that partnership even more, or whether there’s an opportunity for us to do things separately, depending on if it’s a different audience that we’re trying to serve compared to them. So thinking about those local non-profits, state and federal agencies – how we can utilize our limited resources, pool them together, and make the greatest impact?”



Water quality demonstration.

Coming to an Assembly near you!

REAP offers districts chance to influence local funding



REAP Coordinator Michelle Wilson

This fall, Iowans gather again in a uniquely Iowan process for enhancing and protecting natural and cultural resources. [“Resource Enhance and Protection \(REAP\) Assemblies”](#) will be held throughout Iowa, where local citizens gather to share their ideas, concerns and REAP funding recommendations. The Assemblies – held each odd-numbered calendar year – offer the opportunity for public input, program discussion, sharing information regarding REAP funding in each county and updates on program policy.

REAP Coordinator Michelle Wilson says hearing the voice of the public – including commissioners from local SWCDs – is crucial. “We’re hoping for lots of voices,” said Wilson. “Public participation is really about sharing the voice of the people, which we won’t hear if the people don’t show.” [Eighteen scheduled Assemblies started in late September and are scheduled through October.](#)

Wilson says every Iowa county is touched by REAP. Each SWCD receives REAP funds, used for soil and water conservation and enhancement practices and projects. “A successful REAP Assembly means participation by SWCD Commissioners,” Wilson said.

“You’ll lend your voice to the discussion, and you’ll hear from your fellow, local citizens.” Local Assemblies elect five delegates to carry approved recommendations to the REAP Congress, scheduled for early 2024.

According to Green SWCD Commissioner Fred Long, the REAP Assemblies are an essential responsibility for district commissioners committed to bringing more government funding home. “The program is actually a *people’s* program,” said Long. “But it has to be administered by a government agency who are driven by what we tell them what we want, and the legislature decides” about levels of funding. Long – who recently earned the distinction of being named “Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioner of the Year” at the CDI Annual Conference in Ames – urges his colleagues to take time to join a REAP Assembly and invite some guests along. “This is your first voice to the state legislature outside of CDI to relay to the legislature what you want to happen with the money, and why you want more money.”

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Four state agencies are responsible for administering the funding, but the four state agencies are not “the REAP program”, explained Wilson. IDALS, DNR, DOT, and now the Department of Administrative Services are responsible for getting the money to where it needs to go to work on the principles that REAP is for.” The SWCD allocation from REAP comes exclusively from IDALS. “There is a direct allocation that goes out to all the SWCDs from IDALS,” says Wilson. “Every SWCD receives some funds just as every County Conservation Board receives funds through their allocation, so every county has been touched.”

Mike Franklin, Environmental Specialist Senior with IDALS, says the REAP funds provided to SWCDs go to support water quality and soil conservation practices and water quality projects. The majority of the funds go toward Forestry and Native Grasses work – farmstead or field windbreaks, tree and shrub planting, and forest stand improvements. The projects funds are used to support SWCD sponsored watershed-based, water quality improvement projects.

“The REAP Assemblies are your opportunity as commissioners to have input into the program,” says Franklin. “Your chance to ask, ‘Are there things we could add, are there things about the structure or the way the program’s run that needs to be changed to make it more attractive to not only to you as commissioners but your clientele who would use the cost-share dollars?’”

For REAP Coordinator Michelle Wilson, district commissioner input is vital. “You get funding from this program, and if this program doesn’t exist, that part of your funding goes away,” she says. “This is a *people-driven* program – yes, the legislature appropriates the money for it – but it’s through that ‘voice of the people’ in how they use it, that they want and need it, and what they want it for.”

Charlie Schafer earns IAWA Private Impact award for water quality leadership

Agri Drain Corporation and Ecosystems Services Exchange (ESE) founder and leader Charlie Schafer has been named the winner of the 2023 Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance (IAWA) Private Impact Award, which will be presented at the Iowa Water Conference next week in Altoona. Schafer’s leadership at Agri Drain, ESE, and numerous ag conservation organizations has helped scale up and push forward efforts to improve water quality in Iowa and across the U.S. Through his companies, Schafer has invested significant funds and resources into improved ag drainage management, an essential part of the overall water quality improvement picture.



IAWA award winner Charlie Schafer

Direct involvement in public-private water quality partnerships is a common theme of Schafer’s career, one example being the creation of the Agricultural Drainage Management Coalition (ADMC). The ADMC plays a key role in adding edge-of-field conservation practices – wetlands, saturated buffers, bioreactors, and others – across Iowa using the innovative “Batch and Build” model. “Iowa has really gotten serious about this,” Schafer said. “It’s fun and easy to partner with people who really want to get things done.”

Edited from a special IAWA report. [Click here for the complete article.](#)

Madison SWCD “Pasture Field Day”

“There’s just something about getting people together...”



In league with a number of co-sponsors, Madison SWCD held a “Pasture Field Day” in September, featuring producer Randy Gamble, pictured at left pointing out highlights of his conservation field practices, and below left presenting in-depth overview of his strategies and recommendations to an attentive audience of area producers. Speakers also included representatives from NRCS, FSA, Iowa Beef Center, Iowa Cattlemen’s Association, and Iowa Forage and Grassland Council.



“For sharing information and education, our outreach is one of the great opportunities we have as a district to introduce people to things maybe new to them, something they’re not familiar with. There’s just something about getting people together and getting on the land. A field day can help get those gears turning about what they can do on their own operation. Every district could set a goal of having one kind of outreach event – whether that’s an award ceremony, or a booth at the county fair. And there’s a lot of partners out there that you can work together with, you don’t have to do it by yourself.”

Madison SWCD Conservation Assistant Anna Golightly

Monarch Magic in Ames – a Day of Adventurous Fun!

by Prairie Rivers of Iowa's Mike Kellner

The environmental nonprofit Prairie Rivers of Iowa hosted the family-friendly event *Monarch Magic* on Saturday, September 9 at Ada Hayden Heritage Park in Ames. Attendees had the experience of tagging a monarch butterfly to help scientists track their migration and participated in many fun activities to learn more about this butterfly and other pollinators.



A family ready to take flight!

Over 300 individuals were in attendance and participated in diverse activities that ranged from an obstacle course and other activities where kids had fun while learning caterpillar and pollinator survival tactics to helping local scientists and naturalists weigh, measure, tag, and release monarchs. One hundred and forty-six monarchs were tagged during the event.

Besides the primary goal of tagging monarchs to aid in tracking their migration to Mexico, pollinator education was front and center as well. Raising Readers in Story County gave away over 200

pollinator-themed books. Other partners like Story County Conservation, the Iowa Monarch Conservation Consortium, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach /4-H Youth Development, and Bird Friendly Iowa shared their knowledge throughout the delightful adventure had by all.

Prairie Rivers of Iowa Pollinator Conservation Specialist said it best, “The magic of the event was seeing a kid holding an insect, some for the first time, and participating in community science by tagging a monarch and setting it free!”

The ISU Department of Ecology, Evolution, and Organismal Biology, ISU Entomology, and Prairie Rivers of Iowa board members were on hand to share their expertise while helping with tagging.

This event would not have been possible without the support of Alliant Energy, the City of Ames, the Outdoor Alliance of Story County, and the Friends of Ada Hayden Heritage Park.

To learn more about Prairie Rivers of Iowa and its work towards improving water quality and pollinator survival visit prrcd.org.



*The magic of releasing a monarch butterfly!
(Photos courtesy of Prairie Rivers of Iowa)*