

# ---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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### **From: President Jeri Thornsberry**

I do hope all of you had a blessed Thanksgiving. We do have much to be grateful for living here in Iowa. Here is an update on what is happening.

The job ads for administrative support for NRCS's Regional Team Leaders are on [CDI's website](#). These are well-paid positions and fully funded for five years. Please pass the word to anyone you know that would be a good candidate. The work promises to be interesting and it has been my experience that those working in our offices make great team mates!

We did receive good news that the Farm Bill has been extended until September 30, 2024. The NACD Legislative Committee is working tirelessly with our elected representatives in Washington to explain the importance of the Conservation Title embedded in this legislation. Iowa is privileged to sit on this national committee; as your representative, I participate in zoom calls more frequently than in the past. It does seem that there is bi-partisan support to pass this new Farm Bill sooner than later.

CDI Partnership Day is scheduled for Thursday, February 8, 2024 at the Capitol. I do hope to meet you in the Rotunda. To prepare, it would be good to contact your local elected representatives now to invite them to meet you at the Rotunda and then share lunch together. Many of our elected legislators do not have a farming background—either urban or rural. Explaining how installing conservation practices contribute in large part to improving the health of our soils and the vibrancy of our water will not only increase their knowledge but also will improve their understanding of why it is important to increase funding for conservation.

NACD 2024 Poster Contest has kicked off with the theme "**MAY THE FOREST BE WITH YOU ALWAYS.**" Joe Hayes – who manages the poster contest – has early guidelines and rules available. (*See page 4.*) It is my hope that we will reinforce this theme throughout the various CDI events this year beginning with Partnership Day then at Spring Regionals and then at our Annual Conference. We will see!

My wish for all is that the coming holidays bring great joys no matter how you celebrate! And most of all may peace prevail on this earth.

## Executive Director Report – Dien Judge

In order to best represent this organization, I believe it's important for me to meet commissioners and listen to their issues and concerns at their local commission meetings. I have begun traveling to attend local SWCD Commission meetings and events, and I'm going to make it a priority to get out to attend a meeting or event in approximately 25 percent of our 100 districts each year. So far, I have attended meetings and events in Winneshiek, Iowa, Jackson, Story, Cerro Gordo, Grundy, Bremer, Clayton, Howard, Winnebago and Tama. I look forward to attending more meetings and events around the state soon.

The new NRCS agreement to hire 25 Administrative Support staff has been signed and finalized, and we have begun the process of collecting applications for these positions. So far, we have received 13 applications for these positions and we began conducting interviews this week. We hope to have quite a few of these positions tentatively filled by mid-December. We will continue to need help from folks at the local level to spread the word about these job openings. This is a five-year agreement with NRCS that fully funds these 25 employees, which will be located in the 25 Resource Team areas around the state. In addition to the funding from NRCS for this agreement, we have been approved for and received a generous contribution from the Walton Family Foundation to support this program. These funds will be kept in reserve in an interest-drawing savings account until needed. Sometimes the NRCS reimbursement process is slow, so these Walton funds will be good to have on hand to cover any needs if we have to wait for slow reimbursements.

We recently filled our three open DNR Private Lands Wildlife Technician and Wetland Easement Specialist positions, and these three employees have passed their background checks and will be getting to work for us right away. We currently just have one open Wetland Easement Specialist position, which is located in Fairfield. We hope to have this last position filled very soon. All of our job openings are posted on our website, [www.cdiowa.org](http://www.cdiowa.org). Please help send good people our way. Our NRCS Planner agreement has been extended until next year, and our Planner Team is working on developing a Recognition Program that will be implemented to recognize SWCD that have done a great job with their conservation plans.

We have been busy working with our partners to plan CDI events for the next year. Mark your calendars for our annual Partnership Day at the Iowa Capitol, which will be held on Feb. 8, 2024. We will be holding a CDI Board of Directors meeting in conjunction with this event, so please keep that date clear. We've also made plans for Spring Regionals, which will be held the last week of February and the first week of March in 2024. Exact dates and locations are still being decided, but we will be announcing the full schedule for Spring Regionals soon.

*Save the Date!*

**February 8, 2024**

**CDI PARTNERSHIP DAY**

**Iowa Capitol Rotunda!**

*Virtual testing runs March 18<sup>th</sup> through March 29<sup>th</sup>*

## Envirothon team registration set for February 23<sup>rd</sup>



The 2023 Envirothon competition brought together scores of students, teachers and district staff from across the state to one place, for one day of intense tests of knowledge, presentation skills – and some great fun. Let’s do it again! Now is the time for youth leaders, district staff and commissioners to gather 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 upstate New York for the NCF International Envirothon Competition!

The Iowa Envirothon state competition will be held April 29<sup>th</sup> at Jester Park. But to get there, teams will first be challenged in Regional competition tests, which once again in 2024 will be held virtually in an online testing format.

“We had great success with the virtual tests in 2023,” says Program Manager Carlee Sabus. “We know teams appreciated that they had less travel time, fewer expenses, a lot more time for testing – and importantly a greater chance to include all our kids who would like to join the challenge!”

Envirothon virtual tests will be open to take starting Monday, March 18<sup>th</sup> through Friday, March 29<sup>th</sup>. 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 sample tests, rules and regulations, and links to the national event: [2024 Envirothon](https://www.cdiowa.org/2024-Envirothon). Registrations are due by February 23, 2024. For questions, please contact [carlee@cdiowa.org](mailto:carlee@cdiowa.org).

## 2024 Internship Applications Now Being Accepted Through IDALS and SWCD Partnership Program

IDALS is sponsoring an internship program for summer of 2024 hosted through local Soil and Water Conservation Districts. IDALS will fund up to 90% of the hourly wage with a minimum 10% local match contribution from participating SWCDs. Types of work activities are up to each SWCD to decide but should be a diversified set of activities that supports the mission of IDALS, SWCDs and other partners.

Work examples may include practice layout and checkout, conservation planning, mapping, landowner contacts, news articles, water monitoring, urban conservation, resource inventory and other conservation projects. Please consider hosting an intern next summer and discuss this opportunity at your next monthly business meeting. If your District is interested in hosting an intern position, please review and complete the application which was distributed to all Conservation Assistants via email on October 24<sup>th</sup>. If you have any questions about this joint intern program opportunity, contact your Field Representative or Sadi Hawk at 515-281-5258. Applications for funding consideration are due to IDALS by December 15<sup>th</sup> and decisions are anticipated by early January 2023.

*Please get the word out to your local youth groups and interested schools*

## Poster Contest entries due to local SWCD office April 26!

Near us all is a young person with a gift for art, a delight in nature and concern for the environment, just waiting for a chance to put it all together. Let's give them that opportunity: invite them to join the "2024 CDI Poster Contest", now underway! Some details are pending – including new theme logo art from NACD – but dates are firm and we encourage spreading the news to local schools and youth organizations. December is the right time to start spreading the word to as many groups as possible, and as much as you can! Youth leaders, teachers, and parents who may wish to encourage participation by their young conservation-minded artists should contact local youth organizations and schools to see if they would participate. For 2024, NACD announced the national stewardship week and contest theme is "May the forest be with you always".

### Participation guidelines

Applicants must submit their poster art – accompanied by the Poster Contest Entry Form – to the SWCD office in the county which their school or group is located by Friday, April 26<sup>th</sup>. Entry forms must be legible and complete, including a guardian/parental signature and their SWCDs information or the poster cannot be considered. Make sure a copy is securely attached to the back of the submitted poster. For much more information, please consult [Poster Contest critical dates and rules](#). For more general information, and to view Iowa SWCD's 2023 state winners (now in the NACD national contest) visit [CDI Poster Contest](#).

### Nationwide participation

Through the nationwide poster contest, NACD provides students from kindergarten through 12th grade the chance to have their art displayed as part of a national conservation outreach initiative. The Stewardship and Education Committee developed a five-year rotation for stewardship topics – water, soil, habitat, forestry, and a topic of interest – and determines the theme each year. The poster contest is open to public, private and home-schooled students. The top three posters in each category of the national contest receive monetary prizes. First-place winners receive \$200; second place winners receive \$150, and third place winners receive \$100. If you have any questions, please contact CDI Communications Coordinator Joe Hayes at [joe@cdiowa.org](mailto:joe@cdiowa.org).



## 2024 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

**January 19-20, 2024**

**The Iowa Events Center, Des Moines**

**1000+ attendees 90+ Exhibitors 60+ Breakout sessions**

*CDI is a co-sponsor of this annual event. Hope to see you there!*

[PFI Annual Conference](#)

## Q&A with CDI Executive Director Dien Judge

**You're finishing your fourth month as CDI Executive Director.**

**How's it going?**

It is going well! There's a lot to learn, this is a very complex organization, we have a lot of different moving parts, and generally everything works well. There's just a lot of information to take and learn here in the first few months.

**Have you heard any updates on the farm bill? How does a new farm bill affect district work?**

The good news is that the farm bill was extended basically for a year. That means that vital programs will continue; but also, it's *not* a good thing because it's always better to put out a new and up-to-date farm bill that works for the times. This is the next best thing – at least we continue through the next year as Congress continues negotiating all these federal programs. A big part of the farm bill is the Conservation Title and that is basically all the stuff that we work with comes out of that – the reauthorizations, amendments, and new programs that encourage producers to voluntarily implement conservation practices on their land. And of course, that is of critical interest to every Iowa district.



*CDI Executive Director Dien Judge*

**In considering the relationships between our CDI Regional Directors with their respective districts: how can we grow and enhance communication to the benefit of both district and director?**

Regional Directors are the liaison between every one of the 500 individual commissioners, and from there all the way up the ladder – to CDI, to the state and federal government. We are their voice through those Regional Directors. So, it's important for commissioners to communicate to the directors what their needs are, what their concerns are – and send the words up through the chain, because that's the best way to make things work. Looking the other way, the Regional Directors can be a great asset for us at CDI to spread information to everyone to keep those communication lines open.

**The next CDI Partnership Day is scheduled for February 8<sup>th</sup> at the Capitol Rotunda. You've had experience representing a legislator and meeting with constituents— what advice would you give districts who want to have some leverage with their local legislator?**

If you need to find out who your local legislators are, or secure their contact information, you can find that on the Iowa legislature website. Don't hesitate to communicate with them – send them information, send them invitations to events. Elected officials love going to events because that's one of the things they want to do, they want to get out there and meet people in person. So, invite them. When they're there, then you have their ear, and you can talk to them about concerns, issues, and our positions on legislation that might be pending.

*Continued next page*

So, take advantage of the fact that they are looking for things to attend and they're looking for people to meet; and then when you've met them, use that as a chance to let them know what your concerns are. Our Partnership Day is very important. We want all our people there; we want to show the legislators that we have a force to be reckoned with when it comes to our members. We have a large group of commissioners, and they have a voice throughout the state. We want our commissioners to come and speak and be there, and just show the legislators who we are. The other side of that is, it just doesn't end on that day. A lot of times legislators may be easier to get in touch with outside of session, or back at home when they have a community coffee and events like that. A lot of legislators will do that during legislative sessions on the weekend. Go to those, talk to them, introduce yourself. They might have questions for you as commissioners about policy, they want your input, because legislators always need more information about the legislation that they're looking at.

### **CDI is now underway with an interview process for the new administrative positions. Could you speak about how that process is going and what's next?**

We could use help finding people and spreading the word about the job openings. There are 25 job openings around the state, so we have a lot of jobs to fill, and we need help finding people. That could be anything from passing the word around in those organizations you may be involved with and asking around town. The other thing may be sharing on your website and other social media. This agreement was developed out of the need for more staff to help lighten the workload of district staff. This is a way for CDI to help address a need that is out there in every district, and it gets some of the administrative workload off of the other staff and lets them get down to their own important work.

### **You're on a tour of local districts – what are you hearing?**

I'm beginning the process of meeting folks in their local commission meetings. It's been great. Had quite a few already. It's a good way for me to see what folks at the local level do every month at their meetings and learn about the very different projects that are being done around the state. Each commission does things in their own way and that's how it should be. So, it's good for me to see how some folks do things in their community. It's important for me to learn from people at the local level and that's what I need to hear. I need to see people where they are and talk to them about the issues that they're facing and their concerns. With a hundred districts in a big state, I have to be efficient with how I schedule it; always look for ways to make it to more than one meeting in a day and make it the most efficient trip that I can. My hope is to get to about a quarter of the districts each year.



## Iowa Learning Farms Webinars

Wednesdays at 12pm CT

12/6: Rashelle Matthiesen, Iowa State University

12/13: Laura Jackson, Tall Grass Prairie Center

12/20: Brad Jordahl Redlin, Minnesota Department of Agriculture

1/3/2024: Mike Castellano, Iowa State University

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

*With a long road ahead ...*

## CDI Planners take a quick look back at a remarkable journey

*Personnel changes ... long miles on the road ... new Zoom tech (some folks more enthusiastic than others) ... a pandemic – and with the cooperation, assistance and commitment of SWCD staff, commissioners and local communities across the state, success in meeting the goal: 100 district commission-approved 5-year Iowa Soil & Water Resource Conservation Plans.*

### Claire Carlson

*“How are we going to get this done?!”*

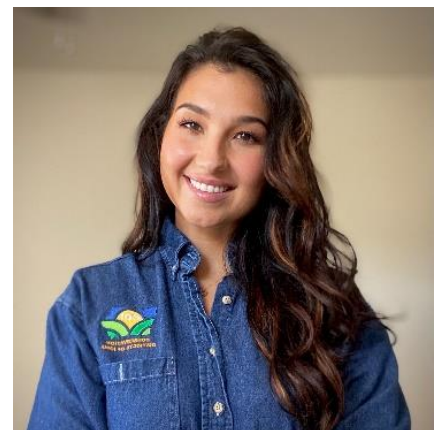


It’s hard to believe that we have reached this point in the 5-Year Planning process. When I joined CDI a little over 3 years ago, I remember looking at our Excel spreadsheet outlining all of the counties, the initial meetings, the secondary meetings, the public meetings, and, finally, the **\*final\*** meetings to review and approve the plan and thinking, “How are we going to get this done?!”. My journey with this process began in July 2020, right after I graduated from the University of Iowa. Whether it was due to my naïve excitement as a recent graduate, or simply gratitude for landing a job when jobs were at a premium and feeling as though I needed to give back somehow, I decided to dive straight in. Thank you to all of the Districts, those who willingly jumped right into the planning process, and those who were slightly skeptical of the process (and maybe working with an Iowa grad 😊)! I am excited to see the continuous development of these plans, as well as bare witness to their revitalization.

### Madison Conley

*“...most challenging yet rewarding experiences...”*

It would have been easier if this planning process was a "one shoe fits all size" approach, but that's the beauty of having a customized five-year plan to your district! Every district put in the hard work to create a unique and purposeful five-year plan that captures the goals for that specific SWCD. Going through this process with 24 counties was one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences I have had in my professional career. Thank you to district staff and commissioners for trusting the process and working with me over the last three years. I am excited to see what goals are accomplished in the following years!



### Alyssa Comer

*“...enjoyed every minute of completing these plans...”*



Jumping on board so late into the 5-year planning process, I definitely was nervous about the amount of plans I had to finish in just a 15-month timeframe. But of course, to no one’s surprise, my coworkers, the district staff and commissioners in each county made it so easy and fun. I enjoyed every minute of completing these plans and getting to know everyone. I’m so excited for the year ahead of us and the future for 5-year Soil and Water Conservation Plans in Iowa.