

---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

Thank you to those who took the time to complete and return the annual conference survey. For those who provided detailed feedback, I am so grateful. Those comments will provide direct input into planning the 2024 conference. Given the clumsiness of this year's survey, I promise that next year's will be much improved! The date for the 2024 conference has been set. For your personal planning purposes, please reserve August 19-20 for you to participate in our 78th Annual Conference in Ames. Your input is needed.

Speaking of input, our next 'Partnership Day' is scheduled for Thursday, February 8, 2024. Plans are underway to create a conservation display in the Rotunda. It would be really good to contact your elected representatives now to invite them to meet with you at the Capitol.

As we all know, funding for conservation practices is needed now more than ever. The majority of our elected representatives do not have farming backgrounds, hence sharing with them the importance of funding for conservation practices is so beneficial. Urban conservation is just as important as what we do in our fields, so opening up this side of conversation will show our elected representatives that we all care about the whole of Iowa's land. Talking points will be distributed the closer we get to this day to help you frame your conversation with your legislators.

For those who will attend Partnership Day for the first time, here is how the day rolls. First the CDI Board meets in the morning for the quarterly meeting with all Regional Directors and Alternates. You all are most welcome to attend. We then hear from our CDI lobbyist, Jim Obradovich, as he reviews the prepared talking points and fills us in on current topics being discussed. We then meet at our Capitol briefed and prepared to meet with our legislators!

Continuing along with new funding for conservation is critical for the work we do and speaking directly with our elected representatives really does make a difference. Let's share our passion for protecting Iowa's land and water with those who represent us. They need to know us—to hear us. Please join me February 8 in Des Moines.

Executive Director Report – Dien Judge

It has been a very busy month for us here at CDI. We've conducted interviews for two openings in our organization for Private Lands Wildlife Specialists, and we had a fantastic group of applicants. We're excited to report that we've tentatively offered jobs to two very qualified people. The onboarding process has begun, which can often take a few weeks, but we hope these two folks can get to work for us soon. These employees will be employed with CDI as part of a cooperative agreement with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, and they'll work every day to help landowners with conservation projects.

We have another job opening for a Southeast Iowa Wetland Easement Specialist position, and we will be conducting interviews for that position next week.

It's a very exciting time at CDI, because we can now announce that we have entered into a new partnership agreement with NRCS to hire 25 new CDI staff members who will provide administrative support in each of the 25 Resource Teams around the state. These 25 new CDI employees will work with the Resource Team Leads and help reduce the burden of daily work that needs to be done to make conservation projects happen. We're very eager to get started with this process, and we hope this partnership makes a big difference in getting soil and water conservation work done.

Elsewhere in this newsletter you will find information about these job openings, and how you can help us find qualified applicants (*see page 3*). Finding capable and eager new staff members can sometimes be a challenge, so we would ask you to help us with the search for good people. If you know someone who is interested in a great job doing conservation work, please send them our way.

Job openings for these positions will be posted on Conservation Districts of Iowa's website, www.cdiowa.org.

As always, please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions, concerns or suggestions.

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 24th.

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 15th and decisions are anticipated by early January 2023.

Twenty-five new Administrative Support positions to aide statewide SWCDs **CDI-NRCS: Help is on the way to relieve staff workloads**

Iowa NRCS has entered into an agreement with CDI that provides much-needed administrative support statewide for each of Iowa NRCS’ 25 Resource Teams. CDI Executive Director Dien Judge announced that new positions financed by the agreement with NRCS will significantly help free up time for SWCD staff, making possible more time for their responsibilities.

“This agreement provides 25 resource team assistants that will be located in each Resource Team across the state,” said Judge. “And they’re going to provide general clerical support to Resource Teams including data entry and tracking, and they’ll provide support to the field offices within the Resource Team, including the implementation of Farm Bill programs, conservation technical assistance, Inflation Reduction Act funding programs, administrative work and other duties.”

According to CDI Program Manager Carlee Sabus, the new Administrative Support positions, once filled, will greatly enhance efficiency for district CAs and DCs by relieving workload. “We know this can address a backlog of work, and help get conservation work done,” says Sabus. “And it will assist admin office duties so district staff, like District Conservationists, can actually get out in the field, and not be held back in the office doing paperwork.” The Resource Teams are comprised of a 4-county area and support staff is primarily overseen by the NRCS Resource Team Lead (RTL). The Administrative Support position is an employee of CDI, but their day-to-day supervision is provided by the RTL.

The Administrative Support position will receive overall workload direction from the RTL and will receive their training and training assignments from the RTL with assistance from DC’s and other RT staff as needed. With the increased amount of Federal and State funding in the conservation partnership in Iowa, it’s important that these positions focus on administrative work that does not fall within someone else’s position description or job responsibilities, but may provide needed support based on workload and staffing levels of the Resource Team Area.

“We at CDI are excited to help provide assistance to each of these resource teams through this agreement, helping get things done,” said Judge. “These will be CDI employees, these will be well-compensated, competitive wage positions, with benefits.”

Program Manager Sabus added that it will be crucial for commissioners, CAs and DCs in each district to “get the word out” regarding the openings to local persons they believe would be interested and a good fit for the openings. “We will be going through applications at CDI where final interviews will be managed, but to get there we will need help from districts to identify and recruit prospects.” [Each individual opening is posted on the CDI website](#) (see sidebar for office locations). Districts are encouraged to copy the appropriate link for their locality, share with potential recruits individually and post on respective social media and websites.

CDI Administrative Support Office Locations:

Sibley
 Humboldt
 Fort Dodge
 Denison
 Sergeant Bluff
 Spirit Lake
 Decorah
 Independence
 Mason City
 Charles City
 Anamosa
 Waterloo
 Creston
 Clarinda
 Guthrie
 Corydon
 Winterset
 Council Bluffs
 Bloomfield
 Washington
 Knoxville
 Keosauqua
 DeWitt
 Williamsburg

Allamakee SWCD Receives Grant for Planting Kernza

Special to Connections
by Allamakee SWCD

The Allamakee SWCD was awarded a 3-year grant from IDALS to implement a perennial grain into a crop rotation. The goal of this is to improve conservation, soil health, and water quality through diversified crop rotations. Through this project, a new crop will be explored to show how it can work with crop rotations and provide data to encourage producers, both local and throughout the Midwest, to consider experimenting with it.

Allamakee SWCD Chair Don Elsbernd says the IDALS grant helps the district sponsor a test plot for kernza, to gauge the local potential of this perennial crop. “It’s always important to be looking into new opportunities and the potential for new crops to put in a rotation, or new uses,” says Elsbernd, who also serves as CDI Vice-President. “There are many things you can do with kernza. It can be made into flour, could be used for feed – quite a few different things.”



Kernza is an intermediate wheatgrass and the only perennial grain crop currently marketed in the United States. It was selected because it has many desirable traits and was already being used in the United States as pasture and rangeland grass. Intermediate wheatgrass is related to other wheatgrass species like crested wheatgrass that are commonly used as forage/rangeland grasses and is a distant relative of wheat and other annual grains.



Kernza starting to grow. (Photos courtesy Allamakee SWCD)

Kernza is currently an uncommon crop, and the hope is that this test plot may encourage producers to consider adding this crop to their rotations, or at least provide them with information to help them better understand what a perennial grain could do for them. Elsbernd says coordinating results with those few producers also experimenting with kernza will help producers understand potential soil health, conservation, and economic benefits of adding a perennial grain crop to a rotation. “If we can coordinate with them, we can see what we can come up with. One trial is one thing, but if you have multiple people doing it, we’ll have all different perspectives.” The 1.5-acre test plot area was donated to the Allamakee SWCD by the Waukon Economic Development Corporation. The Allamakee SWCD planted a rye cover crop in the fall of 2022 after a soybean crop to provide cover on the area until

the Kernza would be able to be seeded the following fall. The rye was donated from Innovative Ag Services (IAS). Kernza’s optimum seeding dates for this region is August 1st -September 30th. The Kernza needs to be seeded early enough for it to have 3 leaflets before a hard frost. Field days are planned over the next few years to evaluate how the seeding is doing and determine if the harvest will be for grain or for forage.

SWRCP Recognition Program

SWCD five-year plans completed – now to the ‘finish line’

With each one of Iowa’s one hundred SWCDs successfully completing a finalized, commission-approved five-year ‘Soil and Water Resource Conservation Plan (SWRCP)’, the Planner facilitators at CDI are ready for the next step in the process – “the finish line of the SWRCP process,” according to one. Planners will soon be reaching out to each district with a special survey to assess how the process can help improve future conservation efforts. The “SWRCP Recognition Program” survey will help CDI, NRCS and other partners gauge SWRCP implementation and district engagement.

Based on the original agreement between NRCS and CDI in 2019, the survey fulfills the expectation that CDI will: “Develop a recognition program for each of the four Iowa NRCS areas based on the ranking of success for development and engagement of their SWRCP.” After evaluations of survey results, some districts will be asked to share insights during the 2024 CDI Annual Conference.

According to SE Planner Alyssa Comer, the Annual Conference is a chance for commissioner interaction regarding SWRCP strategies. “The goal of this deliverable is to give SWCDs that have had success in certain things an opportunity to share with other SWCDs that may be running into issues with a similar goal how they’ve had success, give them the floor to share how it works for them, and give other commissioners the opportunity to ask questions – how they did it, were there any roadblocks, what works well. They don’t have an opportunity to talk to each other a lot, so I think it’ll be good to have it at the Annual Conference and give them time to just chat!”



CDI Planners (l-r) Claire Carlson, Joe Hayes, Madison Conley, Alyssa Comer

The goal of facilitating 100 five-year conservation plans to completion is reason enough to applaud the work of so many with whom CDI Planners got to meet and know, says NE Planner Claire Carlson. “There were a lot of tricky times, a lot of unpredictable worldwide events happening that really impacted the way we could navigate as Planners, and which commissioners could engage with stakeholders,” says Claire. “But things always worked out! The survey is ultimately for the districts to give us feedback and give the partners we’re working with feedback.”

The survey content was created through group sessions between Planner colleagues Claire, Alyssa and Madison Conley, with final approval by NRCS. “We spent months developing these five-year plans and seeking local input,” says NW Planner Madison Conley. “The survey and Recognition Program would speak to the SWCD’s work and reputation, and it might also be influential to people in the community to see that the SWCD was able to be recognized. So it’s a really valuable opportunity to have more recognition and more outreach, which is what we saw in a lot of the plans – ‘community awareness’ as one of the goals.” Survey responses will let CDI and partners know how the five-year planning process may have benefited the district and did it increase district engagement in conservation?

Continued next page ...

“We’re not emphasizing people doing better than others,” explains Alyssa Comer. “Every district is different, every district has a different challenge. This is not to measure success based on how much they’re able to do because there’s been so much issue with staffing and funding in some districts. We also included wanting feedback from the DCs and CAs to see if it’s made them more cohesive, or how has the five-year plan affected the SWCD in all aspects – if they use it, if they don’t, what works for them, what doesn’t. How has their interaction with the community changed, if at all?”

Claire Carlson says that feedback to CDI and partners by district commissioners, CAs and DCs will guide what could be done differently or done better the next time Iowans engage in a new state-mandated planning process. “This is our first go-around, we were trying to get things started. Now that we’ve progressed further through this process and have worked with all 100 districts, we know what we can change, we know things can be flexible, we know it can be a fluid thing, rather than something that’s quite rigid. So districts can provide direct feedback to all of us and help make this experience better for everyone next time we go through this.” Claire added that all districts should respond to the survey. “The more districts that answer, the better the feedback we get for how we can do things better in the future. It’s really integral for future success that every district answers these questions.”

Loran Steinlage Receives Iowa Leopold Conservation Award

By Casey Langan
Sand County Foundation



Loran Steinlage of West Union has been selected as the recipient of the 2023 Iowa [Leopold Conservation Award](#). The award was announced during the 2023 CDI Annual Convention in late August, and Loran – who owns and operates FLOLO Farms in Fayette County – will be formally presented with the \$10,000 award this December at The Big Soil Health Event in Cedar Falls. Loran,

Loran Steinlage has the qualities that make a good land steward. He’s open-minded to innovation, yet patient with the process of trial and error. He welcomes researchers to measure the impact and efficacy of each conservation practice he adopts on his 900-acre farm in Fayette County. Loran is most passionate about sharing what he’s learned with others, from local youth to farmers from Iowa, Ukraine, or Australia. Whether participating in soil

health field days or podcasts, he’s helping forge a new path for modern agriculture. While experimenting with cover crops and no-till practices, Loran saw an improvement in his soil’s health. He realized the cover crops would be more robust and beneficial if they were planted sooner. This led him to explore ways to interseed cover crops into standing fields of corn and soybeans. Loran works with a variety of organizations to host field trials at his family’s FLOLO Farms. The data collected is used to study the agronomics of conservation practices, water quality impacts, flood mitigation, crop insurance provisions, and market viability of alternative crops and methods. In 2021, when Loran welcomed Iowa’s Department of Natural Resources to survey a stream that dissects his farm, they discovered it was full of trout. Without proper stewardship in the surrounding fields, this stream would not support fish that are extremely sensitive to contaminants in water. He believes growing diverse crops, regenerating soil, and ensuring clean water leads to increased farm profitability, environmental regeneration, and rural invigoration.

*The Iowa Leopold Conservation Award is made possible through the generous support of American Farmland Trust, Conservation Districts of Iowa, Farmers National Company, Practical Farmers of Iowa, Sand County Foundation, Soil Regen, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Nancy and Marc DeLong, Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance, and Leopold Landscape Alliance. **This article was edited for space.** [Click here to read the complete story.](#)*