

---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

Our annual Spring Regionals begin on February 27. This is a great opportunity for commissioners and assistant commissioners to meet with their peers in their home region. It is a time to share successes and to express what is needed. Our key conservation partners will provide up-to-date information so that we local conservation leaders are well informed. I am looking forward to hearing from you. I apologize in advance as I will not be able to attend all regionals as I have a family member with serious health issues and she lives out of state.

I was privileged to represent Iowa at the NACD Annual Meeting held in San Diego. The weather was as warm as it was here in Iowa which was hard for me to comprehend! (*See page 3*). During the conference, California's agriculture sector was highlighted along with serious discussions about how they are handling water quality and quantity. I was astounded to learn that in California's eight counties, they grow 25% of U.S. food – 1/3 of all vegetables, 2/3 of tree nuts and fruits, 20% of dairy and if California were a country, wine production would rank fourth in the world.

Don Elsbernd was honored as a Soil Health Champion and presented his conservation journey at a well-attended breakout session – so many questions from the attendees! Understanding improving soil health and its relationship to carbon makes us all carbon farmers!

Dien Judge is connected with the national group of Executive Directors. Approaches and new learnings are shared among the group. Information gained by Dien will help CDI continually improve.

The Farm Bill is progressing slowly. The Ag Committees continue their bi-partisan work. NACD has an excellent reputation and is called upon to give input to many committees. Iowa sits on Iowa's NACD Legislative Committee, so Iowa's concerns are expressed and listened to. Iowa influences national policy and we all should be proud. I am honored to serve you and proud that I now call Iowa home. See you at the Spring Regionals!

Executive Director Report – Dien Judge

It has been quite a busy month for us here at CDI, with a series of great experiences for me as a new executive director. In early February, it was Conservation Partnership Day, when our commissioners and partners gathered at the Iowa Capitol to share the importance of soil and water conservation with lawmakers. This was a tremendous opportunity for us to visit with Iowa elected officials at the Capitol and make our case for conservation. If you weren't able to attend this event, please feel free to send me a note and let me know how we can make this event better in the future, we need as many voices as possible to join together next year.

After Conservation Partnership Day, it was off to the National Association of Conservation Districts for the annual convention in San Diego. It was another great learning experience to join with my colleagues in the NACD affiliate group, the Association of Conservation Executive Directors. This group brings together state executive directors from all around the U.S., many of whom have many years' experience, and builds a network of communication to help each other and share ideas. There are other great reports about the NACD convention throughout this edition of Connections, so I won't repeat everything here, but it was a very well-organized event and I want to thank all of the people who worked hard to put it together.

In other news, it's time for Spring Regionals. This will be another great opportunity for folks to gather and work together to improve soil conservation and water quality in Iowa. If you're unable to attend your Spring Regional meeting, please feel free to contact us here at CDI and share your ideas and concerns.

Between all these events, we continue to conduct interviews with applicants for the CDI Administrative Support Staff positions. We have filled 17 of the 25 positions, and we are interviewing applicants for six locations. We currently need more applicants for the positions in Denison, Washington, Independence and Webster City, so if you know someone looking for a job, please let them know about this opportunity.

Iowa Leopold Conservation Award Seeks Nominees

Nominations and applications are now being accepted for the 2024 Iowa [Leopold Conservation Award](#)[®]. The \$10,000 award honors ranchers, farmers and forestland owners who go above and beyond in their management of soil health, water quality and wildlife habitat on working land.

[Sand County Foundation](#) and national sponsor [American Farmland Trust](#) present the Leopold Conservation Award to private landowners in 27 states. In [Iowa](#), the award is presented with state partners: Conservation Districts of Iowa and [Practical Farmers of Iowa](#). Given in honor of renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold, the award recognizes landowners who inspire others with their dedication to environmental improvement. In his influential 1949 book, "[A Sand County Almanac](#)," Leopold called for what he called "a land ethic," an ethical relationship between people and the land they own and manage. Nominations may be submitted on behalf of a landowner, or landowners may nominate themselves. The application can be found at www.sandcountyfoundation.org/ApplyLCA.

“Iowa is absolutely heard!”

NACD National Conference works to keep conservation funding a priority during federal timeline delays

With deadlines for the Congressional Continuing Resolutions at hand to keep federal programs funded, and available dollars from the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) remaining to be distributed – each affecting the outcome of a delayed Farm Bill still in development – there was urgent business to consider among delegates at the NACD National Conference this month in San Diego, attended by CDI leadership representing the SWCDs of Iowa.

CDI President Jeri Thornsberry said the weeklong event in San Diego reinforces both the urgency of pushing through conservation-focused policy while debate is on-going, and the weight NACD has in those final federal measures. But the time is now to act.

“NACD is a trusted voice on the Hill,” Thornsberry said. “Two essential issues regarding the Farm Bill are still working their way through. One is higher reference prices for commodities, and the second one is the \$20 billion of IRA money and how much of it will be spent for conservation, how much will they bring into the Farm Bill. If it’s in the Farm Bill, it raises our base forever more, which is something we want. That’s still not settled.” However, with the third continuing resolution expiring in the first days of March, that “causes issues with the Farm Bill,” she said. “The longer we wait to get a Farm Bill passed, the fewer IRA dollars that will be integrated into the Farm Bill and to our base.”

Iowa districts were represented by Thornsberry (Black Hawk SWCD), CDI Vice President Don Elsbernd (Allamakee SWCD), Next Generation Leadership Institute (NGLI) representative Angela Rosol (Bremer County), and CDI Executive Director Dien Judge. “NACD conference is a tremendous event that brings together people from all over the country that are involved in conservation work,” said Judge. “At the policy level, it comes down to what we as an association of conservation districts can support at the national level. We get absolutely heard. Conservation is a key part of the Farm Bill. It’s a big component that requires a lot of give and take by members of Congress, and the Farm Bill would not gain enough support to pass without the Conservation Title in it.”



CDI President Jeri Thornsberry speaking during NACD National Conference in San Diego.

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Thornsberry noted Iowa CDI leadership remains on the NACD Legislative Committee – one of only three NACD committees that further consider conservation policy positions for federal review. “That’s a plum committee assignment. We are a key player there,” she said. “I’ve been asked to serve on a subcommittee called ‘Climate and Water’, and I said yes! It’s 60 degrees outside in Iowa in February – do you think we need to pay attention to how we adapt our farming techniques, processes, methodologies, to climate change? We have to step forward and figure how we can adapt to this new reality.”

Of 56 resolutions presented by nationwide districts for NACD review, two Iowa resolutions – passed during the CDI Annual Conference in August – split, with one passing, one failing to gain support. “The Iowa sponsored resolution that passed would increase the ability to add wetlands to previously designated CRP acres,” said Judge. “One of the things that has not been possible is to put in wetlands, which are actually a conservation program, and it’s been a problem we couldn’t have wetlands added to CRP land. One of the resolutions we passed as an organization last summer was to push to allow CRP acres to have wetlands installed on them. That passed unanimously at the NACD.” This resolution now moves on to the national level for policy consideration.



Representing Iowa conservation districts at the NACD National Conference (l-r): CDI President Jeri Thornsberry, Next Generation Leadership Institute (NGLI) representative Angela Rosol, and CDI Vice President Don Elsbernd. (Not pictured: CDI Executive Director Dien Judge)

“Our second resolution – ‘Change Policy Within the Federal Historic Preservation Act’ – was discussed at the NACD Resolution Committee and did not garner enough support,” said Judge. “There were a number of reasons given, but basically a consensus formed that it was asking too much, too significant a change, to the Historic Preservation Act.”

Judge, Thornsberry and former CDI President Ramona Nitz (Cherokee SWCD) will be following up on conservation policy issues in Washington, D.C. for the annual fly-in meetings with Iowa Congressional legislators, scheduled for March 20.

“Iowa has approximately 30 million acres in crop ground and we’re working so hard on improving our soil health and reducing erosion,” said Thornsberry. “The leaders in Iowa, whether they be local level or state level, have been so passionate about conservation that their words have influenced national policy. An example of that influence is the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy. This effort takes a long time – it took generations to hurt the land, it will take a long time to heal it.”

“Above, Below & Cattle: the ABCs of soil health and profitability”

Tama SWCD farmer and livestock producer event:

“It starts with that willingness and perspective to change”

“What kind of soil are you?” That question was asked by keynote speaker Jay Young to more than 75 guests at a recent gathering sponsored by the Tama SWCD. The best answer, said Young, is to be a manager of soil health who is “Not afraid of failure, not afraid of change, and not afraid of what neighbors think – it’s about how you see the world and how you see yourself.” Young assured the room of farmers and livestock producers that today is the greatest time in history to be a farmer. “Regenerative agriculture is changing the world – and that makes you a world changer!”



Tama SWCD event keynote speaker, western Kansas producer Jay Young.

According to Tama SWCD Chair Jack Boyer, the mid-February event in Toledo – “Above, Below & Cattle: the ABCs of soil health and profitability” – is the latest in an annual commitment by the Tama SWCD to bring soil health and conservation guidance directly to local producers and community members. “The Tama Soil and Water Conservation District tries every year to sponsor some sort of educational event centered around soil health. I’ve been listening to [Jay Young’s YouTube videos](#) and his work with bioreactors – I actually started a bioreactor using some of his ideas.” Boyer said Kansas producer Jay Young was invited as keynote speaker because of his extensive background with soil health in livestock operations, including using cover crops and compost extract to improve soil health and save

money on crop and livestock inputs. “We’ve got field crops over the whole county, but in the southern part of the county, we’ve got much more livestock. Most of our soil health sessions in the past have been focused on field crops, so we wanted to put a little more livestock focus this time. Jay could talk about both ends of it.”

Tama SWCD Conservation Assistant Melody Bro noted that according to the recently released “2022 Census of Agriculture” the cattle and calves inventory for Tama County is approximately 31,500 head on almost 300 farms. “So even just locally, we have a lot of cattle on the ground. That’s why we are placing this particular emphasis on cattle producers and incorporating cattle back into those principles of agriculture. It’s great to have them back on the land!”



NRCS Resource Conservationist Tina Cibula

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The five-hour session (including complimentary breakfast and lunch!) featured speakers covering a spectrum of field and cattle conservation insights: Denise Schwab, NE Iowa Beef Field Specialist and co-leader of the Beef Team with ISU Extension & Outreach, reviewed benefits of livestock/crop integration; Adam Nechanicky, Tama County farmer, livestock producer and former district commissioner talked about utilizing cover crops in livestock management; NRCS Resource Conservationist Tina Cibula gave demonstrations on principles of soil health integrating livestock, and covered USDA and IDALS cost-share programs; and also from NRCS, Hillary Olson and Alisha Sedlmayr offered lunch break tabletop demonstrations.

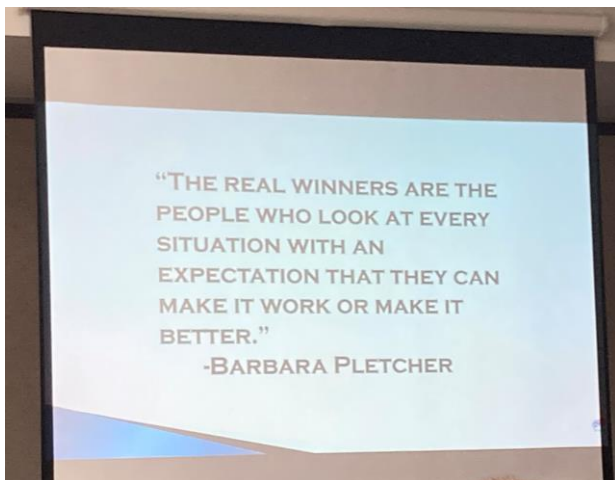
During a break, Young said his goal as speaker and online communicator is to help producers understand change is possible, change is critical. "If you don't believe you can change or you're reluctant to try innovation, then you're not going to change," said Young. "It starts with that willingness and perspective to change and try new ideas to accomplish the things we're trying to accomplish."

For successful events, putting together speakers is the first challenge. Getting people to show up is the next! Tama SWCD CA Melody Bro says she and district staff depend on a number of online, email, office flyer distribution and print media support to get the word out. "First of all, the district has a Facebook page with over 500 followers – and it's great if people will find that and share it. As employees of a USDA Service Center, we have access to an FSA database called 'Oracle' –



The 'ABCs of Soil Health and Profitability' event in Toledo, was joined by 75 guests – a successful turnout made possible by active district promotion through online, email, print and office flyer strategies.

a really good way to get contact info and an email list." Bro said flyers were distributed at USDA service centers in neighboring counties, and *Farm Bureau Spokesman* provided successful print distribution which, she added, needs longer lead time to get into print.



For districts considering similar sponsorships, Jack Boyer said the key is, "You just have to have the will to do it. It's not hard. Think about the people you have encountered that you thought had an impact on *you*. Find someone who does a good job of delivering that message on that topic – and ask them! See what you can get available. Farmer-to-farmer seems to be the most effective communication tool."

SWRCP in progress – last in a series

Insights from the facilitator front lines

By Madison Conley
CDI Planning Coordinator



CDI Planner Madison Conley

What made the 5-year plan process work was collaboration. Not only with the commissioners but with local stakeholders, partnerships, and businesses in the community. I think working together to achieve common goals, or at least set them up as ideas for commissioner consideration, was the best part of the experience. Utilizing the input that we gathered at the public meetings in addition to other meetings in the planning process was what contributed to its success.

I encourage each SWCD to increase community engagement – whether that be attending local meetings, inviting new community members to upcoming field days, or reaching out to other resources for assistance and input. Looking back, I would aim to improve community turnout through different methods of outreach. It's always something that we can continue to improve. Additionally, Local Working Groups are one of the more challenging components to form as we moved through this process. Although each district is required to have an LWG, identifying and recruiting community members willing to

volunteer to be a part of this group was difficult. This relates to aspects of community turnout and involvement with district activity, and is something that we will actively try to improve through outreach methods. That might help improve attendance at meetings, which would then enhance district commission ability to secure working group members.

It was awesome to go around to each of the counties in the northwest and get to see the physical differences in the landscapes that the local commissioners were working with and develop the goals specifically for those counties. Each Soil and Water Resource Conservation Plan is not a 'one shoe fits all'; this plan has been tailored for each of the districts, and I

think it's important to highlight those key aspects in the actions and milestones for those goals that might be similar. Overall, I was grateful to work with such an optimistic and strategic team as we went about developing this planning process. That has really helped me navigate through other long-range planning processes and inspires me to want to continue to help out the SWCDs and see what more I can do as a Planner to help achieve local conservation objectives.

“The Soil and Water Resource Conservation Plan is not a ‘one shoe fits all’; this plan has been tailored for each of the districts...”

– CDI Planner Madison Conley

2024 Iowa DNR County Creek Sign Grant Program Request for Applications (RFA) announcement

The Iowa DNR Water Quality Improvement program is now accepting applications through April 1, 2024 for its “County Creek Sign Grant Program 2024”. The grant will provide funding of between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per county for the installation of creek, river, and watershed signs on county roads, city streets, or on trails within priority watersheds. Funding signs on trails is a new feature in the 2024 grant. The general purpose of the grant is to enhance awareness of creeks, rivers, and watersheds in Iowa.

Eligible applicants include: Iowa County Conservation Boards (CCBs), Watershed Management Authorities (WMAs), Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) agencies, or Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), or counties (including county engineering departments).

The grant will be funded by EPA Section 319 funds awarded by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Water Quality Improvement (Section 319) program. Application materials will be available beginning February 1, 2024. Click here for the appropriate DNR webpage. [Click here for the appropriate DNR webpage.](#)

Application questions may be submitted by email to the following Iowa DNR email address: watershed.improvement@dnr.iowa.gov. **For more information, contact:** Steve Hopkins, Nonpoint Source Coordinator, Iowa DNR Water Quality Improvement Section, Work Cell: 515-505-0140

Promotional handout and higher-res logo now available

CDI Poster Contest entries due to local SWCD office April 26



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 26th. 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 visit [CDI Poster Contest](#).

[Click here for a one-page handout for your use in promoting the Poster Contest.](#)
[Click here for a higher resolution version of the 2024 logo.](#)

Iowa Conservation Partnership Day 2024: Creating dialog, promoting policy ... with free cookies!

Iowa SWCD commissioners, Iowa CDI staff, and partners from NRCS and IDALS joined a number of conservation-focused interests under the Capitol Rotunda in early February, sharing information and promoting sustainable options and policies to state legislators. Iowa district representatives encouraged legislators to assist with three top legislative priorities: 1) Add the term 'soil health' to Chapter 161A; 2) Increase funding for conservation opportunities by updating pay scales for technical assistant staff support, and increase reimbursements to commissioners for mileage and office supplies; 3) and fund the I-WILL Trust Fund, supported by 63% of Iowa voters in 2010, which has yet to be funded by the legislature.



CDI President Jeri Thornsberry meets with State Representatives Bob Kressig (District 75) and Timi Brown-Powers (District 61)



(l-r) State Auditor Rob Sand, Staff Auditor Jon Hansen, CDI Executive Director Dien Judge



CDI staff Alyssa Comer and Tom Phillips greet visitors with conservation policy goals, commissioner sign-in ... and free cookies!

