

---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

Last Wednesday, Past President Ramona Nitz, Dien Judge and I flew into Washington D. C. for the National Association of Conservation Districts Annual Fly-in. Much to our delight, spring greeted us. The grass was green and lush, the daffodils were dancing in the light breeze and the colorful pansies smiled at us with their sweet faces.

This was the beginning of one of the most enthusiastic fly-ins ever. Our Iowa delegation was joined by over 200 other conservation district leaders from across the country and we all had a powerful message for our respective legislators. *(See page 3.)*

We began by sharing with our Iowa representatives that commissioners throughout Iowa have created a keen interest to install new conservation practices as a direct result of the funding received from the Inflation Reduction Act.

We are significantly decreasing our backlog for EQIP and CRP contracts – 50% of applications now being approved up from 1/3 before we received this funding! With locally led conservation being spotlighted now, a promise to continue to increase practices is implied. Since our conservation job is never finished, we emphasized the importance of integrating all remaining IRA investments into the conservation title of the farm bill, quickly passing a farm bill, and increasing funding for NRCS Conservation Operations for FY 2025 so that we have the human resources to actually engineer and install the increasing number of conservation practices.

Your Iowa delegation feels that our message was heard. And then we flew home to winter!

Executive Director Report – Dien Judge

The end of February and early March was time for Spring Regionals. These meetings, held in each of the nine regions around the state, were a great opportunity to meet new people and hear about the unique conservation successes, issues and challenges in each region. *(See page 7.)*

I want to take this opportunity to thank the Conservation Assistants in the nine host districts: Tanya Dykstra in Osceola, Pamela Kollasch in Kossuth, Darla Reding in Hancock, Allisen Hallahan in Dubuque, Jana Coughlin in Cass, Kelly Thomas in Dallas, Pam Coder in Muscatine, Frannie Myers in Union and Nicole Sellers in Jefferson, for their help in organizing these meetings. These meetings simply wouldn't happen without the efforts of these dedicated Conservation Assistants, and we can't thank them enough for their work. We had good discussions in all nine regions. We discussed the future of the CDI Planning program, which provides assistance to every district in the state to help commissioners with their 5-year conservation plans. Our planners have helped commissions to complete their plans in all 100 districts, and now we hope to continue this program to assist in keeping these conservation plans updated and maintained. We heard about the needs in every district for more technical assistance from a staffing standpoint. Pushing for more funding from the state and federal level will continue to be a priority for CDI.

We also had good discussions in every region about how to prepare for our CDI Annual Conference. The conference will be held this summer on August 19 and 20, and we received several great suggestions for speakers and presenters at the conference. We discussed training for new commissioners, Iowa's Open Records and Open Meetings Law, PL 566 Structures and many more topics to add to the agenda for Annual Conference. The board of directors will take these suggestions into consideration as plans are made for Annual Conference. This being my first experience with Spring Regionals, I just want to say it was a real pleasure to travel around the state, enjoying the beautiful weather and Iowa's beautiful scenery. I very much look forward to Spring Regionals next year!

Soil and Water Conservation Week

April 28 - May 5, 2024

Iowa Soil and Water Conservation Week is an opportunity to recognize the important conservation work that has been placed on the Iowa landscape and bring attention to the ongoing work by farmers, landowners and urban residents to protect the state's soil and water resources. Iowa Soil and Water Conservation Week this year is being coordinated with national [Stewardship Week](#), which is sponsored by the National Association of Conservation Districts.

How is your district planning to celebrate Iowa Soil & Water Conservation? Here are some starter ideas:

- Feature SWCD commissioners in publications/interviews
- Encourage DCs/staff to do an interview on the radio or submit news release
- Highlight a Watershed project or success story that emphasizes soil health practices
- Have districts encourage FFA groups to do an activity
- Organize a field day or two
- Social media posts
- Organize a local stream clean-up event

Washington DC Fly-In

“We started a conservation buzz – there’s so much demand out there!”

Leadership from CDI joined state partners for the annual “D.C. Fly-In” in mid-March, bringing district conservation priorities face-to-face with Iowa’s congressional delegation and their aides. They return satisfied they were heard and Iowa’s elected officials at the nation’s capital share CDI’s prevailing goals.

“I thought it went well,” said CDI Executive Director Dien Judge. “Each of the offices was very gracious to us, listened to us and accepted our message. I think generally the folks we talked to, the aides, definitely knew about the farm bill, they understood the conservation title and they were positive on our message. Every one of them was very open to listening to us and we want to thank them for that.” The delegation met directly with Senator Joni Ernst, and Representatives Randy Feenstra and Zach Nunn; the group also had sit-down sessions with aides from every office. The yearly meeting is sponsored by NACD.



Above, Matt Brady (at left) with the office of Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, hears questions from CDI President Jeri Thornsberry (far right) and CDI Past President Ramona Nitz (middle).

“It was different than last year,” said CDI President Jeri Thornsberry. “This time there was more give-and-take, almost like a working session. The staff were well-informed on the issues and up-to-date as to where things stood.” Thornsberry and Judge were joined by Past CDI President Ramona Nitz, State Conservationist Jon Hubbert, and Chief Executive Officer Claire Lindahl of the Soil and Water Conservation Society.

Thornsberry said the leadership team focused on three key points with officials during meetings: “The first is to quickly pass a bi-partisan farm bill that supports producers and bolsters conservation; secondly to keep conservation investments provided by the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) in the farm bill conservation program and integrate the program into the conservation title of the farm bill.” Thornsberry said if that integration happens, the baseline of the farm bill is forever increased, “and we can continue this momentum.” Thirdly, Thornsberry said that even though states and districts may be getting money for conservation practices, “We need technical assistance funding to hire people – engineers and other support people to actually work with the customer, design the practices and get them installed.”

In addition, Thornsberry reminded officials of conservation success happening in Iowa because of sustainability practices promoted by districts. “When we were talking to the staff of our elected people, we got to share with them some of our Iowa conservation practices and projects,” Thornsberry said, noting that past CDI President Ramona Nitz outlined the success of the RCCP program in Northwest Iowa involving cattle grazing.

Continued next page



The Iowa CDI and partners team meeting with Rep. Randy Feenstra (front l-r): Chief Executive Officer Claire Lindahl of the Soil and Water Conservation Society, CDI President Jeri Thornsberry, Feenstra, CDI Past President Ramona Nitz; (back) State Conservationist Jon Hubbert, CDI Executive Director Dien Judge.

“And that area has been doing no-till and cover crops for so long, they weren’t as decimated by drought, whereas other people who hadn’t been using no-till and cover crops were in a world of hurt. I talked about urban conservation and urban ag and that we’re in the beginning stages considering what that needs to be for policy.”

Both Judge and Thornsberry agreed the biggest concern is that the farm bill may not pass this year. “It looks like there’s probably going to be a farm bill passed in the House,” Judge noted. “What we’re hearing is that it may be tougher in the Senate – but we’re hopeful there’ll be a breakthrough there and a bill can be passed.”

Thornsberry said feedback from officials was generally positive. “They understood,” she said. “We started a conservation buzz – there’s so much demand out there. What we’ve done is increase the enthusiasm for conservation practices, and we don’t want to diminish that enthusiasm. I said to every one of them, ‘We have a once in a generation opportunity to really heal our land and improve our water quality. Why wouldn’t we want to do this?’”

Promotional handout and higher-res logo 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.](#)

Cedar SWCD adds new ventures to annual field day agendas

A decades-long commitment to community outreach

For the commissioners and staff at Cedar SWCD, a good day is a field day – and the district works to bring both classic conservation and new alternative ag ventures to their community. With a history of events going back decades in some cases, the district represents how Iowa SWCDs work to make sustainability a local priority through local engagement.

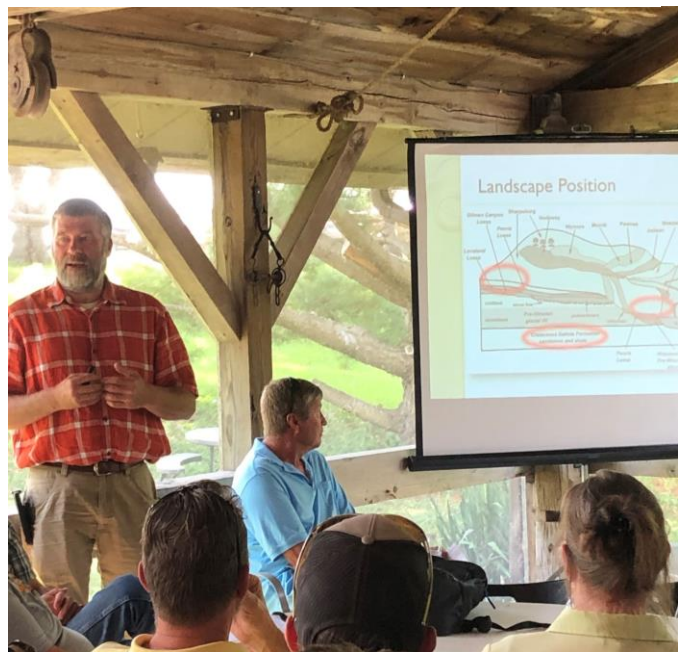
Cedar SWCD commissioner Kent Stuart believes in the importance of teaching land ethics enough to make that education happen on his own family’s land. “Our family first came to this area in 1853. It’s the farm where we have the most conservation practices in place – riparian buffers, contour strips, pollinator strips – and we’ve sponsored a number of field days there.”

Stuart related how three years ago, one planned field day turned into a two-day experience. “We were going to have a field day for cover crops when one of our friends said we should look into these things called ‘saturated buffers’. So when we planned the cover crops field day we added a presentation on saturated buffers.” Then his friend had another idea. “He said, ‘Why don’t we just put one in – have a two-day field day, one for cover crops, one for putting in a saturated buffer!’” It was one of the first saturated buffers in the area. “We’re always open to these ideas, and this was a good spot for it.”

More recently, Stuart added a “Pond Field Day”, promoting both the water flow management and recreational use of farm ponds. “The Pond Field Day was a really nice event – lot of interest from people who had ponds or who wanted to have ponds. We went through construction of them, as well as fish management. It’s a great way to trap the water and let it filter through that. And a company from Cedar Rapids – [Bjornson Pond Management](#) – shocked some fish, where you can then scoop them up, look for disease, tag them, monitor for growth rate. That was interesting!”



The “Pond Field Day” on the Kent Stuart farm featured both conservation and recreation focus. Above, Wes Sleeper of Bjornsen Pond Management demonstrates fish monitoring; below, Soil Scientist Jason Steele offers insights into pond water flow.



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CONNECTIONS

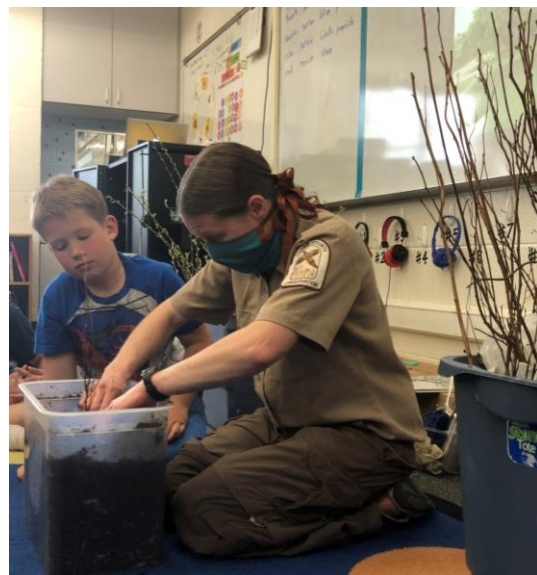
When former Cedar CA Lydia Whitman – active with Women Land & Legacies (WLL) – heard that a 70-year-old woman wanted to tour a “hemp farm”, current Cedar SWCD CA Marcy McBride helped make it happen, with a WLL-sponsored field trip to [Four Winds Hemp Farm](#). “People are asking about what alternative farming is out there, alternative land use,” explained Steward. “And Marcy organized it.”



Hemp Farm field day: Williamsburg DC Joe Dixon (above, in blue shirt); Four Winds Hemp Farm co-owner (with wife Megan) Scott Booher (below).



McBride said during the hemp farm tour, visitors learned about the conversion of hemp (less than .3% THC) into health products. “They did quite a bit of hand lotions, creams, healing and health properties with oils and lotions and face creams,” she said. “We learned about cover cropping for plant diversity, biodiversity within the soil, and protecting eco systems downstream. And they talked about sustainability, including effects of paper, ropes, plastic, medicine and fiber.”



Cedar County Conservation Naturalist Sarah Subbert guides Tipton Elementary third-grader Brody Wendt during “Trees for Threes”.

From hip hemp to classic “Trees for Threes”, McBride said the district visits six elementary schools in Cedar County every year, where each third grader receives a sapling, a book about conservation is donated to the school library, and a demonstration on how to plant the trees is presented. It’s a field trip common in Iowa districts, but especially for Cedar. McBride, considering a start date for the event, said former Cedar CA Lora Schmidt took over “Trees for Threes” in 1994, but it was started by *her* predecessor, former CA Melony Langley ... start date unknown.

“I’m just so proud of this district,” said Stuart. “Our focus the last couple years has emphasized cover crops and batch and build systems. We really hit hard on those, trying to get it up and running.” Continued progress reaching out to the public is important, from field days to sponsoring new conservation practices, he said. “There’s something out there for every farm to do better. There’s tools out there everyone can use to do just a little bit better job with conservation, and that’s what it takes, just a little bit from everybody.”

Marcy McBride agrees, and annual regular field days help get the message across. “Once people see what is available for soil and water conservation and what some of their options are, I think they are more inclined to do something to participate in practices.”

Spring Regionals 2024

An exchange of ideas, concerns & progress in local conservation



Division Director Susan Kozak (above and below) presenting to Region 2 commissioners and staff in Algona.

The statewide Spring Regionals held in late February-early March continued the emphasis on promoting local concerns and locally focused agendas, in addition to presentations by CDI, state and federal partners. “I just want to send out a big thank you to everyone who helped make CDI Spring Regionals a success,” said CDI Executive Director Dien Judge. “We had a great turnout and informative discussion in all nine regions, and it’s only through the work and dedication of the host districts and host Conservation Assistants that we can make these events happen.”

State Conservationist Jon Hubbert noted each year, Spring Regionals raise word of new concerns, and the promise of new progress. “Each year you get a new flavor,” said Hubbert. “It was different in each region. I think in one region we talked about water quality quite a bit, concerns with the directions things are moving. We talked about long standing structural practices that are being removed and how that’s impacting the local erosion control efforts. So those were a couple of the concerns. Looking at the other side of that, the progress that’s been made, the success stories, the impaired waters that have been taken off the impaired list, the dollars that we now have available – a lot of the positive side of what’s going on was shared. Iowa has a diversity



of producers. Our goal within the conservation partnership is to help all of our producers with their natural resource issues and their production goals.”

For IDALS Division Director Susan Kozak, Spring Regionals are a great opportunity for staff and partners to gather with commissioners on their home turf. “This is the place where we typically see the most commissioners in attendance at one event, so we appreciate it when they show up,” Kozak said. “This is our opportunity to help with outreach, education, training for commissioners. We hear so often that commissioners need some additional training – understanding their duties, understanding the partnership. So that’s what we try to get to focus on during these Spring Regional meetings. It’s been interesting to hear all the different questions about

programs, or different structures, where they have a lot of questions regarding their role, and how can they be a part of the different activities across the state. So important conversations happened at these meetings.”

Hubbert noted that workload stress and commissioner retention were some resounding themes heard from a number of staff and commissioners. “We’re figuring out how we can manage that in the future. Another very strong message that I heard again this year is that there’s a lot of passion for what we do. And keeping that passion in the lead with a volunteer-based approach is a delicate balance. We have forces trying to push us toward regulatory and forces trying to pull us back from anything close to regulatory. We need to work with all of them.”

Judge said CDI and state partners will be compiling all comments, ideas and suggestions and using this information to plan for future events. And a word for districts commissioners and staff: “This is your organization, so if there are additional ideas that would help us improve our Spring Regionals, please send them our way.”



SOIL & WATER

CONSERVATION WEEK

April 28 - May 5, 2024

The week we join our nation in focusing on the stewardship of our natural resources.

We all depend on soil for food, fiber and fuel. Let's all protect it.

Thank you to the 500 Soil & Water Conservation District Commissioners across Iowa.



Iowa Soil and Water Conservation Week is celebrated in conjunction with Stewardship Week, sponsored by the National Association of Conservation Districts.



**IOWA DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE &
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