

---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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President: Jeri Thornsberry
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CDI OFFICE STAFF:

Executive Director: Dien Judge

Office Phone: 515-289-8300

Office Address:

Conservation Districts of Iowa
2015 Grand Ave. (Box #15)
Des Moines, IA. 50312

Website: <https://cdiowa.org>

CDI President's Report

By President Jeri Thornsberry

As commissioners, we have much to celebrate during these times. This week, we shine a spotlight on Iowa Agriculture Week, a time to recognize the profound impact agriculture has on our economy, communities, and way of life.

Looking ahead, we'll soon observe Iowa Soil and Water Conservation Week from April 27 to May 4, 2025. This week offers an opportunity to acknowledge the vital conservation work that has shaped Iowa's landscape, while highlighting the ongoing efforts of farmers, landowners, and urban residents to protect the state's precious soil and water resources. Iowa's celebration is aligned with National Stewardship Week, sponsored by the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), and this year's theme is "Home is Where the Habitat Is."



The theme also serves as the foundation for the CDI Poster Contest, where students are invited to express what this theme means to them. I encourage you to motivate students in your district to take part.

Additionally, CDI will host the Envirothon state event at Jester Park, near Des Moines, on April 28. Student teams from across Iowa will compete, -- **Continued on Page 2**

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and the winning team will represent Iowa at the international event in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, this July. These events are all designed to bring attention to the conservation efforts we collectively undertake. As commissioners, we have much to also celebrate within our districts. A special milestone to note is that many Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) will be celebrating their 80th anniversary this year. Furthermore, one of our key partners, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), will mark its 90th anniversary on April 27.

The establishment of NRCS and the subsequent creation of districts were driven by one of the greatest environmental challenges of the time: soil erosion during the Dust Bowl. From that hardship came a powerful realization: conservation is not just a choice, but a necessity for our survival. That partnership, forged in response to crisis, continues to be as crucial today as it was back then.

Now, 80 years later, we carry forward this important work. In 2024, we achieved a historic milestone by contracting a record number of NRCS conservation agreements—1,960 contracts, up from 1,628 in 2023. This increase of 332 contracts represents significant efforts by our entire field team—NRCS, IDALS, and Districts. Along with this, we made notable strides in securing more state cost-share allocations, bringing us closer than ever to fulfilling our mission of protecting and restoring Iowa's natural resources.

This accomplishment is not just a triumph for us—it's a victory for every farmer, urban grower, community member, and all of us who rely on the land to thrive. These conservation efforts are more vital than ever as we face the growing challenges of a changing climate. Severe weather events—droughts, floods, and storms—are no longer rare occurrences; they are part of a new normal that we must prepare for and adapt to. The work we've done this past year has equipped us with the tools needed to better manage our land and water resources in the face of these ongoing challenges.

We find ourselves at a pivotal moment. The increased implementation of conservation practices not only helps us recover from the extreme weather we've endured, but it also ensures we're better prepared for the future. By focusing on soil protection, water conservation, biodiversity enhancement, and erosion reduction, we are building a more resilient future for Iowa and beyond. By adopting smarter agricultural techniques, improving water management, and restoring critical ecosystems, we are securing a sustainable future for generations to come.

Indeed, there is much to celebrate, and we have much to be proud of.

As field work begins, I encourage you to stay safe and continue your vital efforts in preserving our resources.

CDI Executive Director's Report

By Executive Director Dien Judge

We've had several very successful events in February and March, starting with Spring Regionals. I always enjoy getting out on the road and meeting with commissioners and partners all around the state for Spring Regionals. We had good turnouts for these meetings, and a lot of good discussion about the issues and challenges we face as we work toward our goals in conservation. Federal funding was a hot topic, as there have been many questions about federal programs and employment levels. Thanks to all of the host districts (and especially the host CAs) who helped organize these meetings.

As a result of elections at Spring Regionals, we will welcome two new members to the CDI Board of Directors: Craig Fleishman in Region 6, and John Sellers in Region 9. Both of these new directors will bring a strong knowledge base to the board, and we welcome their input. We say thank you to two directors who have stepped down from the board this year: Cindy Valin in Region 6—Continued on Page 3

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Following Spring Regionals, we had a very successful Conservation Partnership Day at the Iowa Capitol on March 11. A great crowd of commissioners and partner organizations joined together to emphasize the importance of soil & water conservation programs at the capitol. Commissioners met with several Iowa legislators and raised the importance of our priorities as an organization.

And just last week, I was joined by CDI Vice President Eric Wessels and Past President Ramona Nitz as we traveled to Washington, DC for the National Association of Conservation Districts' annual Spring Fly-In. Along with our partners, Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship Soil Conservation & Water Quality Division Director Susan Kozak, and Soil & Water Conservation Society CEO Clare Lindahl, we had meetings in the offices of all six members of the Iowa Congressional Delegation.

We had the opportunity to meet in-person with Sen. Chuck Grassley, Sen. Joni Ernst, and Rep. Randy Feenstra. And we were able to meet with staff members in the offices of Rep. Ashley Hinson, Rep. Zach Nunn, and Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks.

In all of these conversations, we emphasized the importance of a strong Conservation Title in a new bi-partisan Farm Bill. We also stressed the importance of maintaining the conservation funding levels from the Inflation Reduction Act in the Farm Bill. And we pointed out the issues that we have been facing in our organization as struggle with the "paused" federal payment of invoices that has caused the layoff of CDI employees.

A bit of good news on that subject: we have received assurance from NRCS that our "paused" payments will be released and paid soon, and we have received approval to proceed with our grant agreements and bring back our staff, once these payments have been received.



Conservation Partnership Day was held at the Iowa Capitol on March 11. Pictured at left, CDI Region 6 Alternate Director Lee Tesdell visits with Mike Franklin, Environmental Specialist from the Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship.

Pictured at right, NRCS Outreach Coordinator, IDAL Soil Conservation & Water Quality Division Deputy Director Kate Bussanmas, and NRCS State Public Affairs Specialist Jason Johnson greet guests at Conservation Partnership Day.





Spring Regionals wrapped up on March 12 with the final meeting in Region 3. Spring Regionals were well attended in all nine regions, with lots of good conversations with commissioners and our partner organizations.

CDI meets with Iowa Congressional Delegation at NACD Spring Fly-In



CDI participated in the NACD Spring Fly-In last week, traveling to Washington, DC, to meet with our Iowa Congressional delegation offices. We had productive meetings in all six offices emphasizing the importance of a bi-partisan Farm Bill.



Iowa Soil & Water Conservation Week to be held April 27-May 4

Every year, SWCDs across the country celebrate Stewardship Week as a way to promote natural resource conservation. This year, Soil and Water Conservation Week begins April 27th and runs through May 4th. The theme for this year is “**Home Is Where The Habitat Is**”.



Please celebrate the week by hosting an outreach activity to promote the outstanding work your district is involved with. As we have done in previous years, we ask that the districts share what activities you are doing that week, so please share your pics, activities and ideas with the central office staff and CDI staff! If you have pictures, please also send the photos to Media@iowaagriculture.gov and we will add the photos to our Facebook photo album. **Don't forget to include captions for your pictures.**

Attached you will find some ideas to help you celebrate the week as well as some talking points to help you promote things you are doing in your district. Feel free to also print the attached flyer and display it in your office or throughout your community. We have also included logos you can insert on the signature line of your emails or incorporate onto any articles or press releases.

We would like to see all districts get involved this year! Let's be creative again this year to keep promoting the great work Soil and Water Conservation Districts do every day!

Thanks for your participation!

Important dates – mark your calendars

- **Poster contest entries due to local SWCD office – April 25**
- **Soil & Water Conservation Week – April 27-May 4**
- **Envirothon State Competition – April 28**
- **Pre-conference resolutions ballots due to CDI office – July 1**
- **CDI Annual Conference – Aug. 25-26**

Envirothon State Competition to be held April 28

Teams of young conservationists will compete this spring in the 2025 Envirothon competition, organized by Conservation Districts of Iowa.

The state Envirothon competition will be held on Monday, April 28, 2025 at Jester Park Nature Center in Granger, IA.

- [2025 Iowa Envirothon Rules and Regulations](#)

The National Conservation Foundation (NCF) Envirothon is an environmental and natural resource conservation problem-solving, team-building, and leadership experience and competition for 9th – 12th grade students across the U.S.

Iowa Envirothon challenges students statewide to hone critical thinking skills and create inventive solutions to the complex local environmental and natural resource issues facing Iowans today. Through regional testing and the state competition, teams of Iowa high school students earn a chance to deep dive into valuable environmental and natural resource problem-solving, team-building, and leadership experiences. In Iowa, the Conservation Districts of Iowa (CDI) manage this competition. Starting in 2024, the [Iowa Conservation Education Coalition](#) (ICEC) is partnering with CDI to promote this program!

In Iowa, teams of students sign up for a regional, on-line exams. The teams with the top 15 scores at the regional level are invited to the state competition at a central Iowa location in the spring.



First, second and third place awards will be paid directly to the applicant's school of choice in two equal installments, one upon enrollment at the beginning of the year and the second at midterm. The six other scholarships will be paid directly to the applicant's school of choice in one installment.



CDI Poster Contest announced

Rules for the CDI 2025 Poster Contest have been released, and are available at this [link](#). The annual NACD and NACD Auxiliary Poster Contest provides students from kindergarten through 12th grade the chance to have their art displayed as part of a national conservation outreach initiative. Each year, the winning posters highlight the work of conservation districts and their state conservation associations, auxiliaries and agencies to protect and enhance natural resources. The contest starts at the district level; winners advance to the state level, and then to the national level, where they receive recognition at NACD's annual meeting. The poster contest is open to public, private and home-schooled students. The top three posters in each category of the national contest will receive monetary prizes. First-place winners will receive \$200; second place winners will receive \$150 and third place winners will receive \$100. For all those who entered, local sponsors may offer each a special Participation Certificate to recognize their participation. The NACD Auxiliary – through their quilt project proceeds, the Country Store at the NACD Annual Meeting and individual donors – sponsor prizes at the national level.

Incentives available for landowners in Climate-Smart Commodities Horizon II program

Through an \$80 million USDA Partnerships for Climate Smart Commodities grant awarded to a partnership of 13 public and private entities led by Roeslein Alternative Energy, Horizon II will provide owners of highly erodible land significant income to participate in the project.

See the full project:

<https://prairieprophets.com/usda-climate-smart-commodities-grant/>