

---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:

President: Sean Dolan
Vice-President: T.C. Loving
Treasurer: Mike Phillips
Secretary: Mary Ellen Miller
Past President: Jeri Thornsberry

CDI OFFICE STAFF:

Executive Director: Dien Judge
Program Assistant: Regan Davis

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CDI President's Report

By Outgoing President Jeri Thornsberry

As my term as president ends, I'm filled with deep gratitude for the privilege of working alongside each of you. These last two years have been a journey of collaboration, resilience, and shared dedication to our land, water, and communities. Thank you for your unwavering support through both challenges and opportunities.

At our 79th annual conference, we embraced the theme *Resilient Stewardship: Cultivating Conservation for Tomorrow's Challenges*. It's a reminder that conservation requires patience, persistence, and a long-term vision—and it's clear that resilient stewardship is alive and well in each of you. You are the steadfast stewards, ensuring that conservation remains essential, not optional.

Despite the real challenges we face—from climate impacts to shifting policies—our work endures because it's rooted in a responsibility to the land and future generations. Every acre conserved and partnership built strengthens our collective resilience.

As I step away, I'm encouraged by the passion and strength within this community. The work we've done together is just the beginning. I'm excited for what lies ahead under the leadership of Sean Dolan as president and T.C. Loving as vice president.

Thank you again for the honor of serving. It's been a privilege, and I look forward to seeing where our leadership team takes us next.

CDI is hiring!

If you're seeking a career in conservation, please click this link and see our current job openings:

<https://www.cdiowa.org/who-we-are/job-openings/>

79th CDI Annual Conference celebrates resilient stewardship

Commissioners and partners gather to share ideas

Iowa's locally elected Soil and Water Conservation Commissioners gathered together, along with partner organizations and sponsors, this week for the 79th Annual Conference of Conservation Districts of Iowa. The conference was held at the Gateway Hotel & Conference Center in Ames Aug. 25 and 26.

The events kicked off with a welcome address by Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig. The day then proceeded with the annual business meeting of CDI, where commissioners elected Sean Dolan as the new CDI President, and T.C. Loving at the new Vice President. The group also debated and voted on resolutions and several changes to the CDI bylaws.

Commissioners heard updates during the meeting from CDI lobbyist Jim Obradovich and CDI Executive Director Dien Judge. Throughout the two-day conference, many awards and honors were announced, and photos of the award winners are included in this edition of *Connections*.



Newly elected CDI Vice President T.C. Loving, left, and President Sean Dolan, right



**CDI Past President
Jeri Thornsberry**

Those in attendance also heard presentations from National Association of Conservation Districts Legislative Committee Chair, Ryan Britt; State Climatologist of Iowa Justin Glisan; Iowa State University Nutrient Research Director Matt Helmers and ISU Water Resources specialist Tom Isenhardt; Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources Director Jake Deutmeyer; Dr. Jacqueline Comito of Iowa Learning Farms; Iowa State University's Dr. Richard Roth; and Taryn Skinner of the World Wildlife Fund. Andrew Thomasen and Maggie Syverson of NRCS also conducted a presentation on Small Scale and Urban Production.

Another big part of the conference was a fund raising silent auction that raised nearly \$2,500 for the CDI Scholarship Fund. CDI gives out more than \$9,000 in scholarships each year, so it's crucial to raise funds at the annual conference for this worthy cause.

We would like to thank our conference sponsors: The Walton Family Foundation, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship Division of Soil Conservation and Water Quality, Iowa Soybean

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Association, Agri-Drain, Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance, Allendan Seed Company, Golden Hills Resource Conservation & Development, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, Truax Company, Center for Rural Affairs, Trout Unlimited, Practical Farmers of Iowa, and Rodale Institute

We'll have more updates and news from the annual conference in the next edition of *Connections*.

Mark your calendars for next year's conference, which will be held Aug. 24-25, 2026.

Below, CDI President Jeri Thornsberry, is pictured with Iowa Conservation Farmer of the Year award winner Fred Abels and his wife, Vicki.

Pictured above right, NACD Legislative Committee Chair Ryan Britt traveled from Missouri to join us for the CDI Annual Conference. Britt gave an update to attendees on the federal Farm Bill and other federal issues.

Below at right, Nicole Vernon of Jones SWCD, receives the Conservation Woman of the Year Award from Casey Gathje, Iowa NRCS coordinator for Women, Land & Legacy.





Above, Black Hawk Soil and Water Conservation District received the Paul Johnson Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Award at the CDI Annual Conference. Pictured, from left, Black Hawk Conservation Assistant Jenna Curran, Commission Chair Jeri Thornsberry, Sherman Lundy, NRCS District Conservationist Shaffer Ridgeway, Mike Miller.

At left, Jeri Thornsberry presents the Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioner Award to Kami Willett of East Pottawattamie SWCD



At left, Larry Berland received the Conservation Teacher of the Year Award, presented by Iowa Conservation Education Coalition Executive Director Linette Bernard. Above, Jeri Thornsberry presented the Ruth Wagner Award honoring outstanding SWCD Assistant Commissioner Jim Gillespie. Not pictured, Darcy Maulsby, Ken Wagner Outstanding Beginning Commissioner Award winner.



From left, Joe Shirbroun, Assistant Commissioner; Tom Simons, Commissioner; Debra Vonnahme, Commissioner; Karen Grote, Conservation Assistant; Ashley Brincks, Project Coordinator; Susan Kozak, IDALS Soil Conservation and Water Quality Division Director; Alan Lemker, Assistant Commissioner.



Two very special people were presented with the CDI Honorary Members Award, presented by CDI President Jeri Thornsberry. Above left, Melody Bro of Tama SWCD, and above right, Robert Lynch of Humboldt SWCD.



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Three individuals were honored with the Outstanding Leadership and Service Award, presented by Susan Kozak. At left, Dennis Carlson, below left, John Tuthill, and below, Mike McGhee.



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Above, Alex Hoffman of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources presented the Woodland Owner of the Year Award to David Fox of Fayette SWCD. Above right, Gene and Bev Schultes of Carroll SWCD were presented with the Field Shelterbelt Windbreak Award by Jeff Jensen of Trees Forever. At right, Jensen presented the Newly Established Farmstead Windbreak Award to Randy Husman of Cherokee SWCD.

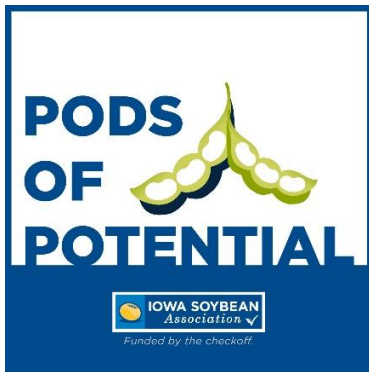


Pictured at left, Jeff Jensen of Trees Forever presented the Farmstead Windbreak (at least 15 years old) Award to Jacob and Caitlyn Lauver of Calhoun SWCD.

Iowa Soybean Association podcast on water monitoring opportunities

How can county SWCDs help farmers to improve their community and downstream water quality? There's a podcast for that!

Listen to Pods of Potential [Episode 21](#) to learn about state wide water quality concerns, Iowa Soybean Association's water lab, how to use the lab as a resource in your community, and how to engage with other farmers on water quality concerns. Listen to Pods of Potential anytime, while you're driving, while you're working, and even while you're recreating outdoors! Also featured in this episode is the Iowa Ag Water Alliance introducing their Cost Share Compare guide as a simple resource to help producers adopt conservation practices.



(Photo: Iowa Soybean Association / Joclyn Kuboushek)

Follow this podcast to stay up to date on Iowa Soybean Association's opportunities in conservation, water quality, and research! Available on [Apple Podcast](#), [Spotify](#), & [Podbean](#)!

To learn more about water sampling opportunities in your county, reach out to Tony Seeman, the Water Lab Service Manager at Iowa Soybean Association (email: aseeman@iasoybeans.com). Tony currently leads all aspects of the water monitoring programs including operation and oversight of ISA's certified Water Lab, integrating monitoring within the ISA Conservation Agronomist Network, and supporting various projects with SWCDs, ag retail, municipalities, and individual farmers.

Bird Conservancy of the Rockies seeks info from farmers and ranchers

Bird Conservancy of the Rockies (BCR), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit based out of Fort Collins, CO, is asking for your help in understanding levels of support for, and barriers to, voluntary conservation among farmers and ranchers in the U.S. Great Plains. BCR is planning to send a survey to approximately 950 conservation district managers (or other staff or board members, whoever feels the most qualified to respond) to help estimate the level of support for several voluntary conservation behaviors within their districts. They will also ask about barriers and resource constraints relevant to voluntary conservation within these areas. Ultimately, the research team will combine these data with ecological maps of key areas for bird conservation across the Great Plains to understand, for each responding conservation district, (1) what are the levels of social support for voluntary conservation within a given conservation district, (2) what are the primary resources constraints and barriers to voluntary conservation in a given district, and (3) what are key districts to focus on for bird conservation, and how can we allocate resources and outreach to make these efforts more impactful? The survey will launch in mid-to-late September, so keep an eye out for it in your email inboxes and please consider supporting this research. The survey should only take approximately 5 minutes to complete. Please reach out to the project lead, Justin Beall (justin.beall@birdconservancy.org) with any questions.

CDI Executive Director's Report

By Dien Judge, CDI Executive Director

The following annual report was presented at the CDI Annual Conference on Monday, Aug. 25:

Conservation Districts of Iowa Annual Conference Report A Year in Review 2024–2025

The Conservation Districts of Iowa (CDI) exists to support Iowa's Soil and Water Conservation Districts and their commissioners by advancing conservation through public education, advocacy, commissioner development, policy engagement, on-the-ground project support, and more. The following is a comprehensive review of CDI's efforts over the past year, made possible by the ongoing support of dues-paying commissioners, grant funding and district partnerships.

How CDI Supports Commissioners Year-Round

CDI's core mission is achieved through an ongoing commitment to service, communication, planning, and advocacy, including:

- **Leadership and Office Staffing**

CDI employs a full-time Executive Director, Dien Judge, and Program Assistant, Regan Davis, as office staff. Contract lobbyist Jim Obradovich, The Capitol Group, is invaluable to CDI to carry out its daily operations and strategic initiatives.

- **Field Staffing Supporting Districts—Funded Through Grants**

- **Conservation Planning Assistance**

CDI offers services to help districts revise as needed their completed five-year Soil and Water Resource Conservation Plans in compliance with Iowa Code Chapter 161A. Planning Coordinators Madison Conley and Carlee Sabus have split the districts to accomplish their deliverables in the 5-year grant program.

- **Administrative Support and Private Lands Workforce**

CDI entered into agreements with the NRCS and Iowa DNR to provide:

- 25 Administrative Support Staff across NRCS Resource Teams
- 5 Conservation Wetland Specialists
- 5 Land & Water Conservationists
- 5 Wetland Engineering Technicians

- **Information Sharing and Communication**

CDI keeps commissioners and staff informed through its *Connections* newsletter, regular email updates, the CDI website, and by organizing the Spring Regional Commissioner Meetings and the Annual Commissioner Conference and Business Meeting—two meetings a year where commissioners gather with peers to network and learn.

- **Support Services for Commissioners and Districts**

CDI assists with operations, guidance on financial and legal responsibilities, district staffing announcements, updates on conservation practices, and sharing local issues and opportunities. CDI also attends commissioner meetings, responds to direct district requests, and maintains resources at www.cdiowa.org.

- **Policy, Advocacy, and Representation**

CDI represents commissioners at local, state, and national levels. Activities included:

- Managing the Resolutions Process to shape conservation policy both nationally and statewide.
- Organizing the annual Conservation Partnership Day at the Iowa Capitol.
- Participating in NACD events, national committees, and U.S. legislative meetings.
- Filing required reports to the U.S. EPA through Iowa's DNR's Nonprofit Source Program.

- **Education, Scholarships and Youth Engagement**

- Hosted the **28th Annual Iowa Envirothon**, reaching 315 students in 63 regional teams and 65 students in 13 state-level teams.
- The Decorah "Load of Carp" team represented Iowa at the 2025 NCF-Envirothon in Calgary, Alberta Canada.
- Conducted the **CDI Poster Contest**. Winning posters are featured at this conference and submitted to the national competition. For the 2024 competition, **Iowa's first national poster award** was given to Chen Gao (Category 4th – 6th grade) from East Pottawattamie SWCD.
- **Awarded \$9,000 in scholarships** to students pursuing conservation and agriculture-related degrees—made possible by generous district donations and proceeds from the Silent Auction at annual conference

Statewide Participation, Collaboration and Leadership

CDI served in leadership and support roles across various conservation-related committees and initiatives:

- **Committee Membership & Advisory Roles:**

- Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance (Advisory Committee)
- NRCS State Technical Committee
- Iowa Learning Farms & Farm Leadership Circles
- Soil and Water Conservation Society
- Iowa Environmental Council
- State Soil Conservation Committee
- REAP Alliance, IWILL Supporter
- NACD Soil Health Champions Project
- Practical Farmers of Iowa Booth
- Awards Judging Committee
- Meetings with Secretary Naig
- Ongoing partner, event, and project planning

- CDI Board and subcommittee meetings

- **Conservation Innovation**

CDI participated in Horizon II, a USDA Climate-Smart initiative, in partnership with Roeslein Alternative Energy and Iowa State University, to promote climate-smart practices across Iowa until the temporary suspension while it is under review by the current administration.

Looking Ahead

As we move forward, CDI remains committed to expanding our programs, strengthening partnerships, and broadening our reach—while staying grounded in our mission to support Iowa's commissioners and conservation districts with integrity, innovation, and responsiveness.

Our goal is to continue cultivating conservation solutions that meet the challenges of today and anticipate the needs of tomorrow. We know that the work ahead will require adaptability, collaboration, and shared vision as Iowa's environmental and political landscapes continue to evolve.

We welcome your ideas, input, and involvement to help guide our efforts—because conservation in Iowa succeeds when we work together at every level.

