

---CONSERVATION DISTRICTS OF IOWA (CDI)---

CONNECTIONS

Conservation Districts of Iowa informs, educates, and guides Iowans in the conservation of natural resources through our local soil and water conservation districts.



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CDI President's Report

By President Jeri Thornsberry

With only three weeks before we convene our 79th Annual Conference of Iowa's Soil and Water Commissioners, scheduled for August 25-26, 2025 in Ames, I want to ensure you have all the necessary information for a productive and enjoyable event.

Conference Details:

- **Dates:** August 25-26, 2025
- **Location:** Gateway Hotel and Conference Center, Ames
- **Registration:** Opens at 6:30 a.m. on Monday, August 25, in the Hallway of the Gateway Hotel and Conference Center. Please arrive early to avoid delays. The conference will commence promptly at 9:00 a.m.
- **Accommodations:** Consider arriving on Sunday, August 24, if you cannot reach the conference center by 8:15 a.m. on Monday morning. Hotel accommodations for Sunday night are provided at no cost to you.

Theme: This year's conference theme is "*Resilient Stewardship: Cultivating Conservation for Tomorrow's Challenges*," focusing not only on the long-term impact of our conservation efforts but also the evolving nature of our work with increasing needs for adaptability and innovation to find new paths towards sustainable solutions.

Agenda Highlights:

- Our banquet speaker, Angela Biggs, NRCS Acting Regional Conservationist for the Central Region, will be our Keynote Speaker. She will acknowledge NRCS's 90th Anniversary and speak to NRCS current events. Speakers and presenters will discuss topics

- Continued on Page 2

Continued from Page 1

relevant to commissioners.

- During the annual business meeting we will discuss and vote on five resolutions, vote on minimal changes to CDI bylaws, and elect officers

Additional Activities:

- **Silent Auction:** Please consider bringing an item for our Silent Auction. Proceeds support the CDI Scholarship Program. Look around you may have a treasure in your home or barn that would be perfect for this auction. Cash donations and high bids are always welcome!
- **Ice Cream Social:** Hosted by your officers and regional directors. Judge their serving skills!

As a conservation leader, your attendance is crucial to stay informed and to represent your counties effectively. We look forward to seeing you and sharing insights at this important gathering. Please register at your earliest convenience if you have not already done so. Your participation matters greatly to the success of our conference and to our conservation mission. Can't wait to see you all.

CDI Executive Director's Report

By Executive Director Dien Judge

As the end of July rolls around, I'm reminded that I'm starting my third year here as Executive Director of Conservation Districts of Iowa. I consider it an honor and a privilege to serve in this capacity. It's very rewarding to be working in a position that has such an important impact on Iowa's precious natural resources.

You'll read about all of the great events we have planned for the CDI Annual Conference, and we hope you'll join us. Please make plans to register for the conference soon.

This past year has been a challenging one, to say the least. Operating an organization that relies on grant funding is always a challenge and can be unpredictable. But we certainly did not predict having a complete and total "pause" in payments for our reimbursements in our grant programs. However, we weathered the storm. Our grant funding was restored and after a painful layoff of employees, we were able to bring back our employees in March and April.

We're proud of the work our CDI program employees do every day to help make soil and water conservation programs a success all around the state of Iowa. We have employees in three grant funded programs: the Conservation Planning Program, the Private Lands Conservation Partnership, and the Administrative Support Program.

All in all, these programs help fund 43 full-time positions all around the state. We have been working hard to get all these positions filled with qualified employees, and we're getting close. We've been conducting interviews to fill vacant positions throughout the last three months, and we've found some incredibly talented and qualified people who will be on the job for CDI.

We still have a few job openings for Wetland Engineering Technicians, so if you know someone who is looking to start a career in conservation, please send them to our website:

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

Iowa Envirothon team competes in Calgary, AB



The Decorah Load of Carp team proudly represented Iowa at the International Envirothon competition last week in Calgary. Pictured at right and above, Lily Sandhorst carried the Iowa flag at the opening ceremonies. Above right, Margret Zook is pictured at the competition. The Iowa team placed 22nd overall in the international competition. Conservation Districts of Iowa organizes and hosts the state Envirothon competition each year.

We'll see you at the CDI Annual Conference

Registration open until August 18

As July comes to an end and we head into the month of August, it's time to remember that the CDI Annual Conference is right around the corner.

The conference, which will be held August 25-26 at the Gateway Hotel & Conference Center in Ames, is an opportunity for Iowa Soil & Water Conservation District Commissioners to gather together with our partner organizations and generous sponsors to share ideas.

A full slate of speakers and breakout sessions are being organized, and Iowa conservation leaders will be recognized for their dedication with many honors and awards. We hope you're planning to attend.

Every year during the CDI Annual Conference, the annual business meeting of our organization is held. All locally elected Soil & Water Conservation District

Commissioners from dues-paying districts are eligible to participate in this meeting, where important votes are conducted on CDI Resolutions. Members will also conduct the election of the next CDI President and Vice President.

Your participation in this process is important to the success of your organization in the future. CDI Resolutions passed at the annual meeting involving state policies are taken to the Iowa Legislature and pushed by CDI's professional lobbyist. Resolutions involving federal policy are advanced and moved through the resolutions process in the National Association of Conservation Districts. Your involvement in this process at the CDI Annual Conference is critical to making your voice heard to influence government policies involving conservation programs.

In addition to the business meeting, the conference will include a welcome and update from Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig, along with a legislative update from CDI Lobbyist Jim Obradovich. There will also be a presentation on federal legislation and the efforts to pass a new Farm Bill from NACD Legislative Committee Chair Ryan Britt.

We'll hear a presentation on "What's New with Climate Trends?" from State Climatologist of Iowa Justin Glisan, Ph.D., as well as a presentation on – **Continued on Page 5**



CDI's 79th Annual Conference will be held August 25-26, 2025 at the Gateway Hotel & Conference Center in Ames.



Ryan Britt

Continued from Page 4 - “Iowa’s Nutrient Management Strategy and Streambanks” by Matt Helmers and Tom Isenhardt of Iowa State University. Angela Biggs, Natural Resources Conservation Service Acting Regional Conservationist, will deliver the keynote address at the conference banquet.



Angela Biggs

On Tuesday during this year’s conference, we’ll hear updates from our key partner organizations, with Karen Rawson, Acting State Executive Director of the Farm Service Agency; Curt Goettsch, FSA Chief Conservation and Compliance Program Specialist; Jerah Sheets, DNR Water Quality Improvement; Jon Hubbert, State Conservationist for Iowa NRCS ; Susan Kozak, Director of Soil Conservation and Water Quality, IDALS ; and Will Myers, IDALS Chief of Field Services Bureau.

Workshop sessions will include a presentation on Saving Tomorrow’s Agriculture Resources (STAR) by Jake Deutmeyer, Understanding the Nitrogen Cycle by Richard Roth, ISU Extension Nutrient Management Specialist; Selling Conservation by Jackie Comito, Director of Iowa Learning Farms ; and Helping Farmers Help Pollinators by Taryn Skinner, Program Officer, World Wildlife Fund.

CDI would like to see all Soil & Water Conservation District Commissioners in attendance, so everyone can build on program successes and share ideas.

The Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship will cover the cost of hotel accommodation and scheduled meals for commissioners and assistant commissioners. Rooms can be reserved after completing the registration process.

Conference registration forms are being distributed to all Conservation Assistants, so please plan to register and attend the CDI Annual Conference.

For more information about registration, go to <https://www.cdiowa.org/annual-conference/>.

Silent Auction fundraiser for Scholarships

The CDI Scholarship Program is funded by your donations, including funds raised in the annual conference “Silent Auction”. Will you contribute this year?

What to donate to this year’s Auction? Here are some starter ideas!

- Products specific to your county or region make great auction items!
- Compile a basket of local goods. Local wines, beers, honey and other items go over great!
- Consider bringing a craft from a local artisan, for example, a wildlife painting, bird house, yard art or quilt.
- Request a donation of an agricultural or conservation product or service from your local co-op or other agribusiness such as corn, bean, cover crop or native grass and forb seed, equipment rental, etc.
- Go green...or red! John Deere, Case, and other branded items, new or old, are always a hit!
- Promote the great outdoors with your donation! Ask a local store to donate hunting or fishing gear for the auction.
- Show your school pride by donating Cyclone, Hawkeye or your favorite team’s gear and items!



Poster Contest in progress

Grinnell Mutual Reinsurance Company makes it possible for CDI to partner with the National Association of Conservation Districts to offer the 2025 Conservation Poster Contest. Each state winner will receive a \$50 prize, and each regional winner will receive a \$35 prize. State winners will be submitted to the national contest. 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. For complete rules and information, please go to this link: <https://www.cdiowa.org/get-involved/poster-contest/>.

Op-Ed submitted to newspapers all across the state of Iowa in July

With the current topic of nitrates and nutrient pollution in Iowa's waterways making news all summer, the decision was made that Conservation Districts of Iowa should weigh-in to the public debate about efforts to improve Iowa's water quality. The following op-ed was recently submitted to newspapers all around the state of Iowa. If you have not seen this op-ed in your local newspaper, please consider sharing it with them:

Conservation Districts of Iowa: Stewards of Our Lands and Waters Elected Local Leadership is Driving Change

Across Iowa's rolling fields and meandering streams, the question of water quality touches all who rely on the land—farmers, communities, and wildlife alike. As concerns about nutrient runoff and sedimentation have grown, so too has the recognition that protecting our water resources requires collective effort and innovative thinking.

The problem is complex, woven into the fabric of Iowa's rural economy and the traditions of its agricultural communities. Solutions require not just regulations, but also education, local leadership, and a willingness to innovate. Amid this challenge, one organization stands quietly but steadfastly at the crossroads of stewardship and solution: the Conservation Districts of Iowa (CDI).

CDI members provide local leadership for state and federal agriculture programs guided by a spirit of partnership, empowerment, and shared responsibility. In this changing landscape, conservation initiatives focus on practical solutions and voluntary cooperation, inviting farmers, conservationists, and local leaders to work side by side.

By providing technical expertise, cost-sharing opportunities, and science-driven best management practices, these programs help address water quality challenges in ways that respect the contributions and realities of row crop growers, who form the backbone of rural economies. Together, these collaborative efforts aim to safeguard the natural resources that sustain both agriculture and communities, fostering a healthier and more resilient future for all.

What are Conservation Districts?

Conservation Districts are local, non-regulatory government entities charged with promoting conservation practices and protecting natural resources at the grassroots level. In Iowa, there are 100 soil and water conservation districts. These districts are led by elected commissioners, often farmers themselves, who have deep roots in their local communities. These elected officials oversee the administration of federal and state dollars for conservation practices within their district.

CDI acts as a statewide coordinator and advocate, linking these districts into a network, amplifying their efforts, and representing their interests at the state and federal level. CDI serves as both a bridge and a beacon: connecting landowners with resources, programs, and knowledge while advocating for sound, science-based policy.

Supporting Conservation Practices on Farmland

The heart of CDI's role is promoting conservation practices that both sustain agricultural productivity and protect water quality. Some of the key practices include:

Cover Crops: Planting cover crops like rye, clover, or radishes between main crops helps prevent soil erosion, improves soil health, and captures excess nutrients before they reach waterways.

Buffer Strips and Riparian Zones: Strips of grass or native vegetation planted along stream banks filter run-off and provide habitat for wildlife, acting as natural safeguards against pollution.

Nutrient Management Planning: Helping farmers fine-tune fertilizer application—using the right amount, at the right time, and in the right place—minimizes waste and prevents nutrient loss.

Reduced Tillage and No-Till Farming: Limiting soil disturbance conserves soil structure, reduces erosion, and keeps carbon and nutrients in the ground.

Wetland Restoration: Reestablishing wetlands on farmland intercepts and treats polluted runoff, providing a natural “kidney” for the landscape.

Through technical assistance, demonstration projects, cost-share programs, and peer-to-peer education, Iowa's conservation districts make these practices accessible and practical for farmers. They understand that no two farms are exactly alike, and solutions must be tailored for soil type, crop mix, and farm goals.

Grassroots Leadership: Building Trust, Driving Change

One of the greatest strengths of Conservation Districts is their local leadership. Commissioners are neighbors, friends, and trusted voices. This proximity breeds trust—an essential ingredient when asking farmers to alter generations-old practices. Farmers are more likely to listen to and learn from those who understand the daily realities of running a farm.

CDI and its network provide not just technical expertise, but also a sense of shared purpose. They foster a culture where conservation is an integral part of successful farming, not an afterthought or government mandate. This approach is more effective than top-down regulation, especially in a state where individual property rights and agricultural heritage run deep.

Leveraging Resources and Partnerships

Addressing Iowa's water quality crisis requires significant investment, financial and social. CDI plays a crucial role in connecting landowners to the myriad state and federal programs that offer cost-share and incentive payments for conservation practices. They help navigate the paperwork and ensure that funding — including from the Iowa Water Quality Initiative, the USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) --- gets to those who need it most. Additionally, Conservation Districts reinforce the value to the land and legacy that conservation practices create.

CDI is also adept at building partnerships. They work closely with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, universities, conservation organizations, and local watershed groups. These collaborations increase the impact of individual programs, encourage innovation, and keep conservation front and center in the policy conversation.

Education and Next-Generation Stewards

Sustaining Iowa's progress on water quality depends on educating the next generation. CDI invests heavily in outreach, from classroom presentations to field days and soil judging contests. Conservation districts sponsor scholarship programs, an all-day student Envirothon contest, elementary age conservation poster contests and school tree planting lessons, all opportunities for hands-on learning. In doing so, they cultivate not only technical knowledge, but also a lifelong ethic of stewardship.

They also reach out to absentee landowners, urban residents, and local government officials, helping them understand how rural land management choices affect everyone downstream. By fostering a sense of shared responsibility, CDI helps bridge the rural/urban divide that often complicates water policy.

Measuring Results and Facing Challenges

Progress in conservation is hard-won and sometimes slow. Water quality improvements may lag years behind new practices and the research that supports those practices. CDI is committed to tracking results, learning from researchers, and encouraging new strategies as they are proven.

Challenges remain—climate change is increasing the variability and intensity of weather patterns, which can undo years of careful work in a single storm. Economic pressures and volatile commodity prices can make conservation a hard sell for farmers facing thin margins. And there are still gaps in policy, funding, and public awareness.

A Vision for the Future

Iowa's water quality crisis did not emerge overnight, and it will not be solved quickly. But the Conservation Districts of Iowa have demonstrated that local leadership, practical solutions, and a spirit of shared stewardship can move the needle. They are proof that when farmers, communities, and conservationists join hands, it is possible to sustain both the land and the livelihoods that depend upon it.

As Iowa looks to the future, the role of CDI will only grow in importance. With continued support, innovation, and investment, Iowa's conservation districts can help ensure that the state's waters run cleaner, its soils remain fertile, and its rural legacy endures for generations to come.

Jeri Thornsberry, President, Conservation Districts of Iowa

Share your story in *Connections*

Do you have an interesting story about soil and water conservation to share? Does your district have a successful program, or an award winner you're particularly proud of? Please send your stories and photos, and we'll share them in this newsletter. Send items to admin@cdiowa.org and **please make a note that the item is for the *Connections* newsletter.**