

---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 EXECUTIVE BOARD:

President: Jeri Thornsberry
Vice-President: Eric Wessels
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Secretary: Mary Ellen Miller
Past President: Ramona Nitz

CDI OFFICE STAFF:

Executive Director: Dien Judge
Program Assistant: Regan Davis

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

CDI Board Meeting & Summer Tour Recap

CDI held its quarterly board meeting with Regional Directors on June 16, following a joint session with the State Soil Conservation and Water Quality Committee. Secretary Mike Naig and State Conservationist Jon Hubbert addressed attendees via Zoom.

The following morning, we boarded a bus for the annual Summer Tour in Northeast Iowa. Our day began with a visit to the Chuck Gipp Decorah Fish Hatchery, a production rearing station for rainbow trout. Named after former DNR Director Chuck Gipp, the hatchery is supplied by Siewers Spring—Iowa's second-largest spring and the hatchery's sole water source. The spring flows into Trout Run, and while it can reach up to 50,000 gallons per minute, it was running at around 8,000–9,000 gallons per minute during our visit—still enough to keep the waterfall gushing!

This area is characteristic of karst topography, with over 238 known sinkholes within 3.5 miles of the hatchery. About 130,000 catchable-size (10–12 inch) rainbow trout are raised annually, taking 16–18 months to reach maturity at a cost of roughly \$3.50 each. Hatchery staff stock 15 streams across Allamakee, Howard, Mitchell, and Winneshiek counties, along with six seasonal community trout fisheries. Between April and October, approximately 113,000 trout are released. In April, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approved a watershed plan for Trout Run and Siewers Spring to address water clarity issues. Over the past 16 years, trout feeding has been suspended an average of 42 days per year due to cloudy water. The plan aims to reduce erosion from nearby farms, preserving the cold-water integrity critical to hatchery operations.

The hatchery grounds also feature a charming limestone office and residence built in the 1930s by the Civilian

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Next, we visited the Allamakee County Conservation Board's Driftless Area Education and Visitor Center in Lansing. The facility's interpretive exhibits highlight the cultural, natural, recreational, and historical richness of the Driftless Area. Spanning three levels and 10,000 square feet, the center is nestled beneath limestone bluffs, offering sweeping views of the Mississippi River. It was a special moment to relax on the wraparound deck in rocking chairs, watching tugboats push barges carrying Iowa's commerce upriver. Our lunch stop was Waukon City Park, where we explored the city's impressive urban conservation efforts. A project was undertaken to protect Indian Springs Pond, a natural feature long present on the site. A stormwater wetland was constructed to manage runoff from a 60-acre drainage area. Permeable pavement was strategically installed in parking areas to reduce upstream runoff, directing water into bioretention cells and rock checks. This treatment train successfully addressed severe gully erosion in the road ditch upstream of the pond. For a town of fewer than 4,000 residents, this was a truly remarkable accomplishment.

We concluded the day back in Decorah at Seed Savers Exchange, where Secretary Naig rejoined us. His appreciation for our work was evident as he participated in the Seed Saver-led tours, clearly enthusiastic to be part of the event.

Despite forecasts of severe weather, we were fortunate to enjoy a beautiful day filled with learning, collaboration, and connection.

Looking Ahead: Annual Conference

Our annual conference is fast approaching! You'll soon receive a preliminary agenda highlighting our distinguished speakers—both in the ballroom and breakout sessions—all aligned with this year's theme. As always, we'll host a Silent Auction to raise scholarship funds for the next generation of students. Your generous contributions make a real difference. We encourage you to assemble and donate a basket of items representing your district—every donation supports our shared mission.

Let's make this year's conference impactful and inspiring. We can't wait to see you all there!

CDI Executive Director's Report

By Executive Director Dien Judge

We hope you've been able to enjoy the warm summer weather here in Iowa. It was a pleasure to travel to northeast Iowa earlier this month and participate in the annual Summer Tour. Now it's time to make our final preparations for the CDI Annual Conference in August. We think you'll enjoy the conference we have planned. Please consider registering for the conference. Information is now being sent out regarding registration.

Districts have been sending in their Pre-Conference Ballots, so we will soon be tabulating the results of the voting and preparing for any votes that will be conducted at the annual conference. All Pre-Conference Ballots must be sent to CDI by July 1 to be counted.

We will also conduct our silent auction to raise funds for the CDI scholarships. CDI will be giving out \$9,500 in scholarships in 2025, so we need to keep raising money for this important effort. The scholarships will help build the conservationists of the future.

And as usual here at CDI, we have been busy conducting interviews and filling positions in our programs. We still have several job openings, including Conservation Wetland Specialists, Wetland Engineering Technicians and Land & Water Conservationist positions, 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/>

CDI Annual Conference provides an opportunity to learn and share ideas

Folks at CDI have been busy making plans for the 79th Annual Conference, which will be held August 25-26 at the Gateway Hotel & Conference Center in Ames. 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.

More conference speakers and events are being finalized, so watch for communications in the coming weeks from CDI about the final conference agenda. 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/>.



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

CDI Scholarship Silent Auction Fundraiser to be held on August 25

The CDI Scholarship Program is funded by your donations, including for the annual conference "Silent Auction". Will you contribute this year?

What to donate to this year's Auction? Here's 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!



"Please donate some wonderful, intriguing, interesting, unusual items for our Annual Silent Auction. It is so much fun to watch the bids increase as time passes. Let's help our young people interested in conservation. We need the next generation really engaged. Donate an item or more and help supplement our Scholarship Fund!"

CDI President Jeri Thornsberry

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.

All SWCDs should have sent their winning posters to their CDI Regional Director via email with a photo of each winning poster and their poster contest entry form. 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/>.

State Soil Conservation and Water Quality Committee hosts annual Summer Tour

The Conservation Districts of Iowa Board of Directors joined the State Soil Conservation & Water Quality Committee this month for the SSCWC Annual Summer Tour. Those participating toured the Chuck Gipp Decorah Fish Hatchery, the Driftless Area Education Center in Lansing in Allamakee County, an urban conservation project at Waukon City Park, and the Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah.



Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig, pictured above joined the group at the Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah during the State Soil Conservation & Water Quality Committee's Summer Tour. The tour took participants to the Chuck Gipp Decorah Fish Hatchery, pictured below. In the photo at bottom right, CDI Past President and SSCWQC member Ramona Nitz and CDI President Jeri Thornsberry visit Siewers Spring, which is the second-largest spring in Iowa and can flow as much as 50,000 gallons per minute.



Beyond the Surface: How NRCS Engineers Help Plan and Maintain Iowa Watersheds

by Jolene Bopp, Public Affairs Specialist, USDA-NRCS, Des Moines, Iowa

This is the first in a series of stories highlighting ways USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service is helping Iowa farmers protect the natural resources on their land, often behind the scenes. NRCS celebrated its 90th anniversary in April, having formed from the 1930s Dust Bowl.

In early May, engineers with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) launched a boat into a body of water held by one of the Badger Creek Watershed structures in Madison County, Iowa. Instead of bait and tackle, the boat carried a survey rod and a GPS unit to help determine how well the structure is functioning, and what may need to be done to keep it working in the future.

Although this structure is over 50 years old, it continues to help manage 300 acres of upstream drainage by reducing flood risk, controlling gully erosion and trapping sediment before it reaches Badger Creek Lake. NRCS worked closely with local sponsors to design and implement solutions to protect the land and improve water quality. Thanks to good stewardship and strong partnerships it continues to do just that.

The project was a collaborative effort between NRCS and local sponsors including the Dallas, Madison and Warren County Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Madison County. The watershed plan was signed in 1960. The structure was completed in 1973 under Public Law 566, now known as the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) Program.

"This might have been an equipment test run, but the information we gathered is valuable and usable right now," said Hayes Durbin, civil engineering technician with the NRCS in Iowa. "We can start assessing whether this site needs repairs, rehabilitation or if it's still operating as designed."

Durbin and NRCS State Technology Engineer Tim Mensing are preparing for a large bathymetric survey later this month. Typically, they use a remote-controlled bathymetric boat with survey equipment already built in. Due to the large scale of the next site, they are utilizing a manned boat they will equip with the survey rod and computer.

At the bottom of the rod is the transducer, which sends out and receives the sonar signals that detect the bottom of the pond, stream or wetland. On the top of the rod is a Trimble R12i receiver, a GPS unit which collects the latitude, longitude, and elevation data. This data is key to understanding sediment buildup and changes in water storage over time. – **Continued on Page 7**



Engineers with USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service recently conducted a bathymetric survey in Madison County.

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Combined, this data allows engineers to create a 3D map that gives them the ability to track sediment buildup and long-term capacity changes. Over time, sediment builds up in watershed structures, decreasing water and sediment storage capacity. Sediment runoff reduces water quality and contributes to erosion or infrastructure damage during high-flow events. If the dam is silted full it will continue to provide the same flood control benefits.

Why Iowa's Watersheds Matter

Watersheds are interconnected, impacting every community. They provide resources for all living things to survive. Watershed dams are built through federal, state and local partnerships. They were designed to protect property, farmland and infrastructure from erosion and flooding. The technical expertise of NRCS engineers becomes especially critical when these structures start approaching or exceeding their expected design life which is typically 50 to 100 years.

Since 2005, watershed structures have provided approximately \$435 million in flood and non-flood benefits statewide. NRCS engineers work closely with local watershed boards, soil and water conservation districts, and landowners to address resource concerns and issues like failing embankments, unstable streambanks, and grade stabilization.

"Collaboration is key," NRCS State Conservation Engineer Christian Osborne added. "We're not here to just design and walk away. We stay involved, help monitor, and make sure these investments continue to pay off for farmers and rural communities."

In this case, the surveyed structure is nearing the end of its lifespan, prompting conversations between NRCS and local partners about what's next. The data collected will play a key role in those discussions.

Engineers Behind the Scenes

While people may know NRCS for its financial assistance programs like the Environmental Quality Initiatives Program (EQIP) or Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), NRCS roots are grounded in the technical services they provide. NRCS engineers and technicians design terraces, grassed waterways, grade stabilization structures, and water and sediment control basins. They inspect and evaluate infrastructure that might be decades old.

Iowa NRCS has built 2,695 structures through all four of the NRCS Small Watershed Programs offered over time. The first structure was built in 1948, and most structures are still in place today providing the benefits they were intended for.

In 2024, NRCS engineers assisted Iowa communities with about 20 watershed structures. The importance of functioning watershed infrastructure may go unnoticed unless something goes wrong. Thanks to the work of NRCS engineers and partners, many of those risks are managed long before they become emergencies.

Learn More

Through NRCS watershed programs, staff provide free technical and financial assistance to help project sponsors address watershed resource concerns in local communities. Assistance in Iowa is available through:

- **Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program** assists communities in recovering from natural disasters and sudden watershed impairments.
- **Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) Program** focuses on reducing flood risks, conserving natural resources, and improving water quality.

To learn more about NRCS technical and financial assistance, contact your local service center: farmers.gov/service-center-locator or visit: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted>.