

# ---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 President's Report**

**By President Sean Dolan**

I've had the honor of serving as Region 4 Director for the past two years, bringing practical experience and a conservation-minded approach to the role. During quarterly board meetings, I strive to offer thoughtful contributions and a different perspective on the issues at hand. I also serve on CDI's Finance and Personnel Committee.

My wife, Sara, and I farm in southeast Buchanan County, where we own and operate a 600-sow breed-to-wean facility. Together with my brother, Mark, we finish all the pigs produced on the farm. Our livestock operation plays a key role in the sustainability of our cropping system—thanks to nutrient recycling from the pigs, I haven't needed to purchase additional phosphorus or potassium for over 20 years.

On our tillable acres, I raise corn, soybeans, and oats. I've been a long-time advocate for conservation practices, using cover crops for more than 16 years. I also run a custom cover crop drilling business to help other producers in the area adopt soil health practices. In 2024 Sara and I received the Iowa Farm Environmental Leader Award.

With this practical knowledge of farming operations and conservation practices as well as conservation programs, I can be a resource for other commissioners throughout the state, especially through the Resolutions Committee where CDI advocates for changes in policies and practices.

### ***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/>

# STAR tool launches in Iowa

## *Online system connects producers to conservation incentives*

An updated and enhanced STAR Tool has been launched in Iowa for the 2025 crop year by Conservation Districts of Iowa (CDI) and Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources (STAR), a national scale non-profit, to amplify state efforts to address Iowa's natural resource concerns and further empower and reward farmers making progress on their conservation journey – wherever they are. The STAR 1 to 5 rating system is used to evaluate conservation practices on individual fields using a locally-driven, science-based approach to effectively and efficiently scale grassroots conservation efforts by incentivizing and rewarding the adoption of practices that have relevance to producers and their supply chain partners. Using the free, online STARtool.ag, Iowa producers can find out how their field ranks on a nationally recognized scale that evaluates their conservation progress. The STAR evaluation form typically takes just 10 - 15 minutes and is tailored to the producer's crop type – available for row crops and wheat. Farmers receive a 1- 5 STAR score along with a field-level customized Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP); a field sign with their STAR rating; direct connections to unbiased technical support through local STAR Navigators; and opportunities to participate in cost-share and incentive programs.



"STAR is an easy, voluntary, and versatile tool to support conservation. It was created by farmers for farmers to help them make the most of limited resources and to make informed decisions," said Michael James, Watershed Coordinator at Polk Soil & Water Conservation District. "The STAR Tool is a useful resource for producers to evaluate their current practices and determine the best practices to improve their STAR score, conservation impact, and their bottom line."

STAR has been available to Iowa farmers, but this year's field forms have been adapted more specifically for Iowa and the enhanced online STAR Tool features make it even more valuable – producers receive tailored and field-specific Conservation Innovation Plans (CIPs) with customized technical and financial resources and reporting formats for sharing progress with landowners and lenders. For a limited time, producers who complete a CIP will also be entered to win one of five \$50 gift cards. Each field with a completed CIP will be entered (one prize per producer, deadline is October 15<sup>th</sup>). Participation in STAR allows producers to see progress over time and the CIP will help producers ensure they are on track in meeting their conservation goals while balancing the economic viability of their operation. STAR is committed to protecting a producer's privacy – data is never shared beyond STAR without the producer's permission.

"Supporting Iowa farmers and ranchers is essential to continue to grow our agricultural sector and build our economy. STAR is a revolutionary new tool that promotes sustainable agricultural practices and is a convenient and cost-effective resource to ensure our agricultural community is able to maintain productivity while protecting the land for future generations of Iowa farmers," said Dien Judge, Executive Director, Conservation Districts of Iowa.

The IA STAR field forms and Conservation Innovation Plan design were developed collaboratively by key stakeholders in the state and the national STAR non-profit. Iowa STAR has been led by CDI as the IA STAR Affiliate and collaborative Steering Committee and Science Committees, made up of representatives from Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, local Iowa SWCDs, The Nature Conservancy, Iowa State University and University Extension, Practical Farmers of Iowa, Heartland Coop, Iowa Nutrient Research Center, and guided by input from Iowa farmers. The committees adapted the STAR framework to fit agricultural production systems and the different realities of farming specific to Iowa. This partnership will leverage existing conservation programs to provide additional technical and financial support for Iowa farmers as they transition their operations to include more conservation practices such as cover crops, reduced tillage, improved nutrient management, edge of field practices, and more diverse rotations. -- Continued on Page 3

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"TNC realizes, as a science-based organization, that farmers and ranchers are critical to both conservation adoption and implementation on the lands in which all life depends. We are excited to join others in support and promotion of STAR," said Paige Frautschy, Iowa Agriculture Program Director, The Nature Conservancy

Local, trained STAR Navigators will provide one-on-one support and technical assistance to STAR participants as they enroll in STAR and explore planning and program opportunities. Several IA SWCDs have been promoting STAR including Polk and Dubuque Counties. Recruitment is underway for county and statewide STAR Navigators to assist producers with STAR enrollment and to provide direct technical support. Access to the STAR Tool administrative dashboard allows Navigators to streamline technical assistance to their clients, track participant progress, and access the state and locally specific resources database to learn about available technical and financial programs.

You can find the tool at [startool.ag](http://startool.ag). Please email Regan Davis, [regan@cdiowa.org](mailto:regan@cdiowa.org) if you have any questions about the STAR Tool or need assistance in enrolling.

## Star tool will amplify conservation efforts and connect producers to conservation incentives

By Dennis A. Carney  
National STAR Board Member  
Former CDI President

STAR, or Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources, is a program many have heard of but may not completely understand. If you attended the Conservation Districts of Iowa (CDI) annual conference in Ames in August you heard a presentation by Jake Deutmeyer about benefits of using the program in your farming operations.

STAR was developed by two Soil and Water District Commissioners in Champaign County, Illinois in 2017. It was conceived to help farmers meet the conservation practice implementation goals in the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy. They created a tool that has since grown and expanded into several midwestern and western states. In 2023, the National STAR organization was established to ensure a standardized scale across all regions and production systems.

The STAR tool is completely free, practice-based, and completed on a field-by-field scale. The tool is easy to use and takes about 10-15 minutes to complete on each field. After answering questions about fertilizer application, tillage, crop rotation, and other practices, the tool assigns points for each item and calculates a final rating for that field from 1-5 STARS. This rating is shared only with the producer (which they could also share as a report with their landlord if desired). A 1-STAR rated field indicates a producer is just beginning the conservation journey while a 5-STAR rated field illustrates a producer doing everything possible to protect soil health, water quality, and long-term viability of the farm.

After completing the field form, farmers are guided to create a Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP) for the field. The CIP helps identify practices for the following crop year and the available educational and technical resources in Iowa that will help you add conservation practices (and thus improve your STAR rating). You can share your conservation journey with neighbors and friends by requesting a STAR field sign for free and displaying.

Iowa STAR is currently working on verification protocols. To maintain credibility for the tool, a small percentage of the field forms submitted will be verified through submitted records, receipts, etc. STAR's scoring system is customized to each state and each production system. In Iowa, the IA STAR Steering Committee helps determine how to run the program, and the IA STAR Science Committee considers Iowa's most pressing resource concerns in determining the questions asked and the scoring system. Serving on the Science Committee are representatives from several government agencies funding conservation work, university soil scientists, commodity group representatives, producers, and CDI staff. The current Iowa form was evaluated and updated this year.

So why take the time to complete the STAR form? When I was a tenant, I always wanted some sort of index to show landowners that I was doing things right and protecting their land. STAR does this. Now as a landlord, I want a way to know that my land is being farmed in a sustainable manner. STAR does this. All I have to do is write – **Continued on Page 4**

### STAR FACTS:

- STAR is currently active in 7 states and will be in 11 by the end of October.
- In Illinois, producers are required to complete a STAR form before receiving any state conservation cost-share.
- In Colorado, STAR has 6 different field forms to accommodate a variety of production systems.
- STAR farmers in IL, KY, and IN that are selling wheat to Siemer Milling Company are earning up to \$25/acre for incentives paid based on their STAR ratings.

**Continued from Page 3** -- into the lease with my tenant that a specific STAR rating (or above) is required as a condition of tenancy. End of story - no specific fertilizer timing or tillage requirements or other specifics.

Going forward, I believe STAR will be used as proof in many of the new sustainability programs that producers are now faced with. National STAR is promoting the program in more states and with other conservation groups in an effort to have STAR become thenational standard with which you can compare your operation with others across the country. As we all know, there are many buyers, food manufacturers, end users, government agencies, environmental protection groups, and consumers that are demanding our nation's food supply be grown in the most efficient and sustainable manner. STAR will help a producer on this journey. As with so many groups in this realm, we are currently facing some financial challenges, but I am confident that public demand will drive some sort of solution and let us get on with this important work. I encourage you to go [STARtool.ag](http://STARtool.ag) and fill out a free field form just to see where you are on your conservation journey. The more interest we have, the easier it will be to encourage the tool's use by government agencies, industry, and the public.

## CDI Resolutions updated following Annual Conference

Following the final votes at the CDI Annual Conference in August, several resolutions were passed and will be added to the CDI official resolutions list. Per CDI Bylaws, a resolution must receive a minimum of 60% YES votes to pass. Resolutions receiving 50% or greater NO votes fail. Tallied results are listed below. Resolutions #8-12 were brought forward at the annual conference and are noted as such.

An updated complete CDI Resolutions packet will be sent out to all districts soon. It will also be made available at [www.cdiowa.org](http://www.cdiowa.org).

2025 RESOLUTION	YES % (# of votes)	NO % (# of votes)	DISCUSS % (# of votes)
1. Provide a State Soil Conservation Technician Position for Every SWCD <b>PASSED</b>	62.4% (236)	22.5% (85)	15.1% (57)
2. Update/Revise, as necessary, IDALS Job Descriptions to Allow Overtime Hours <b>PASSED</b>	72.4% (273)	15.6% (59)	11.9% (45)
3. Increase REAP Forest Stand Improvement Cost Share Rate <b>PASSED</b>	76.7% (297)	10.3% (40)	12.9% (50)
4. Increase REAP Tree Planting Cost Share Rate <b>PASSED</b>	78.6% (304)	7.2% (28)	14.2% (55)
5. Shorten the Maintenance/Performance Agreement for Conservation Cover from 20 Years to 10 Years <b>PASSED</b>	70.3% (277)	16.5% (65)	13.2% (52)
6. Change NRCS Wetland Design Standards to Allow Deeper Water for Fish Survival <b>FAIL</b>	29.9% (113)	58.5% (221)	11.6% (44)
7. Change CRP Cost Share to Assist with Filter Strip Earthmoving Costs <b>FAIL</b>	32.5% (121)	53.5% (199)	14% (52)
8. Change CRP Policy to Allow Contracts Less than 10 Years <b>Resolution not moved</b>			
9. Change CRP, EQUIP, REAP, and IFIP Cost Share Policy to Work in Synchronization <b>Resolution not moved</b>			
10. Change Fall Tilled Soybeans to be Ineligible for State Cost Share <b>FAIL—Voted on at Conference</b>	36.1% (69)	63.9% (122)	Total Votes 191
11. Allow Districts to Decide the Percentage of their IFIP Fund Allocation Spent on Management Practices <b>FAIL—Voted on at Conference</b>	51.3% (98)	48.7% (93)	Total Votes 191
12. Petition Iowa Legislature & Iowa Governor to Convert Existing State Owned Ground Slated to Be Sold into Public Use Areas <b>PASSED – Voted on at Conference</b>	61.5% (117)	38.4% (73)	Total Votes 190

# National Conservation Foundation announces 2026 Next Gen Leadership Institute Cohort

The National Conservation Foundation (NCF) is now accepting applications for the 2026 Next Generation Leadership Institute (NGLI) Cohort, a national leadership development program for conservation district officials.



The yearlong program equips participants with tools to become national leaders through personal, civic, and organizational training. Graduates are prepared to address complex natural resource challenges and serve as trusted voices for locally led conservation efforts at the local, state, and national levels.

“It takes confidence and real skill to fine-tune your message and share your conservation story,” said **Patti Lardie**, a trustee of the National Conservation Foundation. “NGLI is a transformative experience that helps leaders grow into that role.”

Eligible applicants include currently appointed or elected conservation district officials and those with current or potential for statewide leadership positions. All applicants must demonstrate a commitment to future district service and submit letters of support from both their local district and state or territory association.

Applications and payments must be received by **11:59 p.m. Eastern on Friday, Oct. 31, 2025**. A limited number of scholarships may be available. Interviews will begin in mid-November.

To apply, visit the [Next Generation Leadership Institute](#) page

## CDI Executive Director's Report

By Executive Director Dien Judge

I'm writing to you today on the eve of an expected government shutdown. These kinds of failures of leadership are becoming all too common in our federal government, and they do nothing positive for the American people. At CDI, we will be faced with difficult challenges as we try to fulfill our mission during this tumultuous time.

CDI employees all around the state are preparing for what we hope is only a brief inconvenience in our regular work schedules. We are asking everyone to reach out to our elected officials and urge them to negotiate and resolve these issues so our federal, state and local partners can continue our work in conservation.

As you'll see in this edition of Connections, there are lots of positive things to promote, so let's focus on the positive. This would include the STAR program, our amazing winners of the CDI Poster Contest, and your important work in crafting and voting on the CDI Resolutions.

Please don't hesitate to reach out to me at any time if you have questions or concerns. My email address is [dien@cdiowa.org](mailto:dien@cdiowa.org).



# Iowa Ag Water Alliance launches Cost Share Hub

The Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance has announced a new tool on their website that will help farmers, landowners and ag professionals find the resources they need to make conservation projects more affordable.

[The Cost Share Hub](#) is a central place where you can find information and linked resources about how to pay for many on-farm conservation practices. Here's a sample of what you'll find:

- **Cost Share 101**: Get a downloadable copy of 10 questions you should ask before you sign a financial assistance agreement. Plus, learn about the pros and cons of different types of programs.
- **Cover Crop Cost Share** ([costsharecompare.com](http://costsharecompare.com)): Narrow down cover crop programs to the ones that fit your needs the best. And even find ways to get up to \$100 per acre.
- **Carbon Market 101**: Find the most helpful resources to understand what carbon markets even are and what you should know before you consider one.

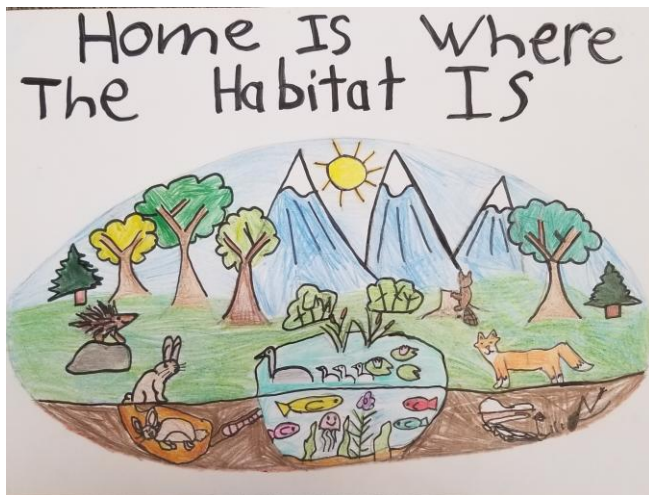
**Batch & Build FAQ**: Whether your a land owner, project coordinator, or fiscal agents, the tool aims to provide answers to your most common questions.



# CDI Poster Contest statewide winners announced

*Entries were judged at CDI annual conference in August*

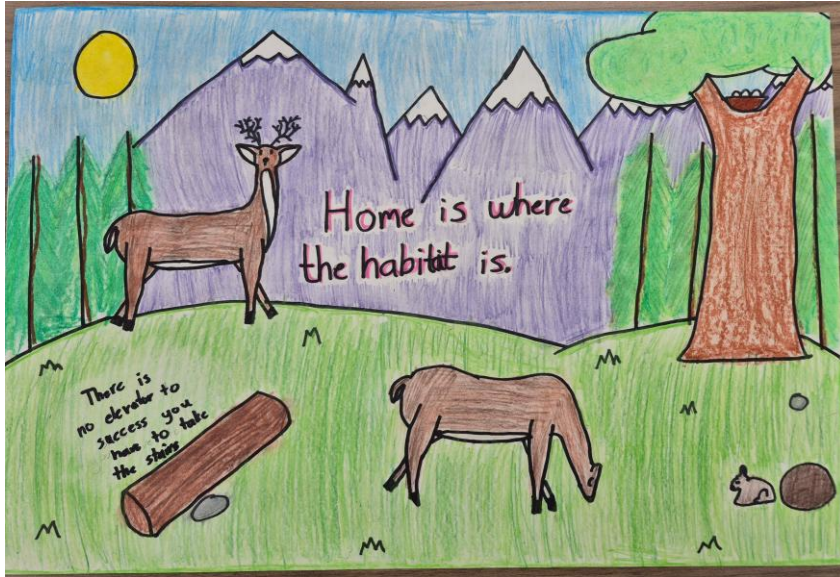
The CDI Annual Poster Contest finalists were judged by the CDI Board of Directors at the annual conference on August. 24. The following posters were deemed the winners. Grinnell Mutual Reinsurance Company makes it possible for CDI to partner with the National Association of Conservation Districts to 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/>.



Division 1 (K-1) – Frances Hauswirth  
Palo Alto SWCD



Division 2 (2-3) – Preslee Henderson  
Davis SWCD



Division 3 (4-6)  
Elizabeth Gunsolly  
Ringgold SWCD

Division 4 (7-9)  
Sophia Doty  
Clay SWCD



Division 5 (10-12)  
Amanda King  
Sioux SWCD