



# **CDI GOES TO WASHINGTON**

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION  
DISTRICTS 2017 LEGISLATIVE FLY-IN

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**MARCH 20-21, 2017**  
**WASHINGTON, D.C.**

Dear CDI Board,

April 5, 2017

Thank you so much for the opportunity to represent Conservation Districts of Iowa at the National Association of Conservation Districts' (NACD) 2017 Legislative Fly-In.

The majority of our 'Iowa Delegation' arrived in the early afternoon of Monday, March 20<sup>th</sup>. After some sight-seeing – including the famous Cherry blossoms! – Bob Lynch (CDI President, Humboldt Co. Commissioner), Alex Schmidt (CDI VP, Johnson Co. Commissioner) and I met at the hotel to discuss our schedule and talking points for the following day. We met Kurt Simon, Iowa NRCS State Conservationist, for dinner and further discussed our plans and goals for the following day.

The next morning, Alex and I attended a coffee organized by Congressmen Loeb sack, Young and Blum. The room was packed with Iowans and Alex and I spoke for almost an hour with Congressman Loeb sack's Chief of Staff, Eric Witte, about many topics including farmers' growing interest in soil health and the economics of conservation. I briefly said hello to Congressman Young, and Eric also introduced us to Congressman Loeb sack who remembered speaking with Alex at previous meetings. Congressman Blum did not attend the event.

While Alex and I were at the Legislative Coffee, Bob and Tim Palmer (NACD First VP and Madison Co. Commissioner) attended the NACD Legislative Breakfast where they had the opportunity to hear from Kansas Senator, Pat Roberts, Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee.

As Bob, Alex, Kurt and I headed to our next meeting, we were halted by police and secret service personnel. A few minutes later, President Trump's motorcade zoomed out of the Capitol, and we caught a glimpse of the President as he sped by.

Next, we met with Will Collier, a Legislative Assistant to Congressman Loeb sack. We each introduced ourselves and then I led Will through a brief history of soil conservation, and the need for the District Commissioners as a bridge between federal programs and local communities. Kurt discussed the unique partnership in Iowa between the NRCS, Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, and the Districts. I added that we are only as strong as our weakest members, and that the cuts in NRCS technical staff were having a negative effect in the Districts. We also discussed the positive role that EPA 319 non-point source grants are playing in Iowa. Alex highlighted one 319-funded project, The Price Creek Watershed Project, which is making great strides in reducing bacteria levels and sediment loading. Will was particularly interested in collaborat-



Catherine DeLong, Will Collier,  
Alex Schmidt and Bob Lynch

-ing with his Republican counterparts on protecting 319 grants, which are slated for a 30% cut under the President's proposed budget.

We took a break for lunch before heading back to the Longworth House Office Building to meet with Congressman Blum. We had been scheduled to meet with the Congressman himself, but he was in the middle of voting, so we met instead with his Legislative Director, Kelsey Griswold. We began to tell her about Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and the role that Iowa's 500 Commissioners play in conservation, but Kelsey was in constant contact with the Congressman during our meeting via her phone, and it was difficult to engage with her. We left her with a presentation that detailed our support for increased conservation staff, conservation funding, and a snapshot of some of the successes of the 319-funded Dry Run Creek Watershed Project in Congressman Blum's district.

With only a few minutes to spare, we arrived in Congressman King's office for our next meeting. The Congressman was also in the midst of voting, so we met instead with Suanne Edmiston, Legislative Council. We led her through the history of the districts, and also informed her that it was an Iowan, M.L. Wilson, who drafted the State Soil Conservation Districts Law. We showed Suanne a picture of Congressman King's commissioners in Crawford County, and she was confident that "the Congressman would recognize a few faces." Bob discussed his use of federal conservation programs early in his career, and how he is now able to pay for those conservation practices out of his own pocket – or as Bob would probably say, the conservation practices pay for themselves in good soil health and structure. But as a beginning farmer, having access to those programs was an important stepping stone to being a conservation-focused farmer for years to come. I added that it is a common misunderstanding that farmers get a "blank check" when they participate in conservation programs. Instead, farmers across Iowa match the federal and state dollars they are given – and in many occurrences, pay more.



Catherine DeLong, Kurt Simon, Alex Schmidt, Congressman Young, Tim Palmer & Bob Lynch

Our next meeting was with Congressman Young, and we were pleased to be joined by Tim Palmer and Chris Heck, Government Affairs Associate with NACD. Congressman Young welcomed us into his office and greeted us all as if we were old friends. He led the discussion by asking us what we thought of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). We all agreed that it was still very useful, and that in recent years the NRCS has been forced to turn away up to three-quarters of eligible applicants for both EQIP and the Conservation Stewardship Program. I showed the Congressman a snapshot of a 319-funded project in his district, the Badger Creek Watershed Project, and he recognized the project coordinator and was able to name the man she's engaged to! So Congressman Young has certainly not forgotten his roots or the community he grew up in. He also informed us that he was working on conservation-focused bill with some other Representatives, and he would keep us informed of its progress. I also asked Chris Heck to update us

if he heard anything about this bill. We closed by asking Congressman Young to think of CDI and the Districts as a resource on any agricultural or conservation questions he or his staff might have. We are always happy to answer questions and we have commissioners in every county with whom we can connect him.

Next, we walked across the Capitol lawn to meet with Senator Ernst's staff. While we were waiting in her office the Senator, herself, came out to greet us. Bob got a selfie with the Senator and we also took a group photo. We met with two of the Senator's agricultural staff, Devin Mogler from Lyon County and Michael Dolch from Montgomery County. Both were extremely knowledgeable on agriculture issues and came from farming backgrounds, so we could skip over a lot of introductory points and zero in on the real issues. We talked about the need for more Conservation Technical Assistance, or staff, in the Districts. Alex discussed how the Districts, who previously employed no staff, now employ over 100. And the majority of commissioners still have full-time jobs, and really do not have the time or training to manage an increasing number of employees. I talked about the importance of continuing conservation funding through the Farm Bill. In 2014 Farm Bill conservation funding (Title II) was cut by 10%. The agriculture sector was willing to take this cut because commodity prices were high in 2014, but that is not the case now and farmers cannot manage



Kurt Simon, Alex Schmidt, Senator Ernst, Catherine DeLong & Bob Lynch

any more cuts. Many farmers do not have a 401k, or a way to invest and gain interest every year, instead they invest in their soil through conservation practices. And as their soil health increases, it can pay dividends, but only if they are able to gain access to cost-share programs for that initial investment. Devin and Michael were very engaged in the conversation, and asked intelligent questions like, "How can we get Certified Crop Advisors more involved in conservation?" We closed by inviting both of them, and the Senator to the NACD Summer Tour in Iowa. We explained that this is the first time Iowa has ever hosted this national event, and we would be honored if the Senator would attend. Devin and I are now in regular contact, and he alerts me whenever the Senator votes or speaks on an agricultural issue.



Bob getting a "selfie" with the Senator!

Our next meeting was with Andrew Brandt, a Legislative Assistant to Senator Grassley. Senator Grassley could not join us because the Judiciary Committee was in session to discuss Judge Gorsuch's nomination to the Supreme Court. We were also joined at this meeting by Tim Palmer and Chris Heck. Andrew was, initially, difficult to engage. We began by talking about the usefulness of conservation programs. Andrew's opinion was that "cover crops are a no-brainer" and that farmers didn't need to be paid, they should be using them on their own. Bob, immediately picked up on that point and asked, "Why do you think cover crops are a no-

brainer?” Andrew went on to give a very eloquent answer about the benefits of cover crops including increased water infiltration, water holding capacity and organic matter. We learned that Andrew came from a farming family in Missouri and that he had been trying to convince his brother and father to use cover crops for years. This discussion was the highlight of our conversation, and really brought Andrew out of his shell.

With our legislative meetings finished, we headed to the NACD Legislative Reception where we enjoyed many conversations with our fellow Fly-In attendees, as well as speeches from Chairman Frank Lucas (R-Okla.) and Ranking Member Marcia Fudge (D-Ohio) who both serve on the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry. As has become an Iowa tradition, we ended the evening at Senator Grassley’s favorite restaurant, The Monocle.

Handwritten thank you notes have been sent to all our representatives and to NACD for their efforts in organizing this great event. I feel it was truly valuable and that we had many worthwhile conversations. Each meeting was different depending on the knowledge of the staff, but in each gathering we advocated for no further cuts to conservation funding in the Farm Bill and increased Conservation Technical Assistance. We left each legislator with a snapshot of a 319-funded watershed project in their district and a picture of the commissioners in their home-district. We asked them to think of CDI and the districts as a resource and invited all of them to the NACD Summer Tour in July.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Bob, Alex, Tim and Kurt for being such effective and dedicated advocates for conservation in Iowa. And thank you again to our Board Members for giving me the opportunity to represent Conservation Districts of Iowa in DC.

Many thanks,



Catherine DeLong, Water Quality Specialist  
Conservation Districts of Iowa



Bob and I celebrating a great day of meetings in front of the US Capitol!