

---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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From: CDI President Dennis Carney

I hope field work is wrapping up for most of you and that the recent rains haven't caused any serious issues. Large rain events are always an opportunity for illustrating how conservation practices can make money by reducing soil loss.

Your CDI Board of Directors met last week to make some hard decisions on the work of CDI in light of our nation's health situation. **Our annual conference in August will, for the first time, be held virtually**, with staff and our events committee currently working on how best to present reports, some commissioner training, awards, and topical presentations. We will keep you informed on our plans and hope that you will support us as we try something new.

The CDI Board has decided to hold this year's resolution voting entirely by mail. Voting information has been sent to your CAs. Commissioners have until the end of July to vote on the nine resolutions submitted by districts, and two put forward by the CDI Board. We are also asking Commissioners to approve the archiving of several completed or outdated resolutions from years past.

Your Board of Directors is submitting a resolution to add references to soil health in the Iowa Code. In addition, the Board is asking that CDI establish a committee to pursue by-law changes concerning the definition of CDI active members, the definition of a quorum at our annual meeting, and the clarification of the role of assistant commissioners; the committee's recommendations would be acted upon at our 2021 meeting. Much time and discussion has gone into these proposals and it is the Board's hope that you will support them. Please reach out to me or any Board member with questions or concerns. Continue to stay safe and help those around you to be safe.

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

Why do we work to conserve the soil and protect water quality? Why do we study soil health and its effects? I remember going with my Granddad to a field where terraces were being built because Granddad wanted to see how the work was going. I was not very old, probably only 8 or 9. There was a row of bright red flags running around the slope of a hill and when I asked Granddad what they were for, he said to show where to put the dirt. Then he pointed out very plainly what would happen to me if I pulled the flag I was standing by and moved it! What I do not remember is the “why” terraces were being built. **The reason for conservation was not explained, it was just a given that in our family we tried to prevent soil erosion.**

I firmly believe that we need to improve the rate of soil conservation adoption as well as increase our work in water quality in Iowa. And I include myself in that same category. Last summer, we had drone video footage taken of one of our fields so we could use it to show conservation practices to riders who stopped at the conservation tent when RAGBRAI went by the house where I grew up. I can say that we used the footage but when I first saw it, I was embarrassed to see small ditches in the field. We have terraces and waterways, used no-till, and cover crops – but 16 inches of rain in May 2019 created ditches. I know that I can do better. The STAR program will be one of those ways we can help farmers and landowners do better. We will be able to open a conversation with participants about how certain conservation and water quality practices work and why using them would benefit their land. The Iowa STAR Science committee has made their recommendations and the Steering committee has accepted those recommendations. Those districts that are in the Iowa STAR pilot area will soon have the field form so they can contact producers to enroll fields for the 2021 crop year. We will share the Iowa field form with all districts in the coming months.

We will soon have a new logo for CDI. When I started with CDI, it was mentioned that we should have a newly designed logo, I just did not know where to start. When Joe Hayes started work as planning coordinator and communications director, he offered his connections to designers who could do the work. I was surprised how quickly they responded and at the June 2 virtual board meeting, the board voted to move ahead with a new logo. We will be able to introduce the new logo to you next month.

I started this column thinking about the people in my life who influenced my conservation ethic, my Granddad, and my Dad. I am thinking about them because we receive notices at CDI when a commissioner or former commissioner passes on. We should honor the conservation ethic and legacy of those who have passed by continuing their work and always remembering that we can do even better than we are now.

A Perfect Storm for Compaction

After two of the wettest planting and harvest seasons in decades, IDALS Environmental Specialist Clark Porter warns producers to be aware of “the disease [of] compaction.” In a recent column for the Blackhawk SWCD newsletter, Clark says that Iowa may be facing a “perfect storm” for compaction. **“The recipe for compaction involves more rainfall, increased soil moisture, heavier equipment, reduced soil organic matter, and damaged soil structure,”** writes Clark. “Last year saw heavy equipment traffic on saturated soils. While ruts are a dramatic example of compaction, they are by no means the only spot where it occurs.” The University of Nebraska found that in a normal year a farmer will drive on 90% of a field; 80% of the compaction happens in the first pass. “Compaction leads to increased runoff and nutrient loss to our waters. Reducing it is a win-win for your farm and your watershed. Let’s keep an eye on the clouds and make ruts a rare sight once again.” To read Clark’s column, and his suggestions for combating compaction, click here: [A Perfect Storm for Compaction](#).

Polk SWCD targets dramatic increases in yearly installation of saturated buffers

Bundling Conservation Infrastructure – A Case Study.

Controlling nitrate leakage from tile drain water before it reaches surface waters is a critical conservation goal for Iowa Soil and Water Conservation Districts, which actively promote and assist in installing bioreactors and saturated buffers that offer effective solutions. But as Polk SWCD Commissioner John Norwood explains, installing conservation practices or infrastructure one-at-a-time can be slow, time consuming and expensive.

“Waiting for landowners to approach the district can be hit or miss,” says Norwood. Brainstorming with district staff and partners, the Polk SWCD developed a creative approach to dramatically increase install rates of saturated buffers in Polk: “What if we tried targeting where we want the conservation on the ground, and then selling, designing, and constructing in bundles in particular geographies?”



According to Tanner Puls, WQI Coordinator for Polk SWCD, the district typically installs two or three buffers a year, meaning long-range objectives for conservation infrastructure could take decades. Instead, the Polk SWCD initiated and is testing a new process that has the potential to greatly accelerate yearly install rates. This process – “bundling conservation infrastructure” – combines several key components: employing software to target potential locations for buffers, adding a \$1,000 incentive to farmers to

approve an install, directly pitching landowners on the benefits of saturated buffers, and bundling contractor bidding.

Puls says the team secured landowner agreement to survey 120 potential tile outlets and narrowed best prospects to 90 sites. **As of mid-June, the team is approximately a third of the way through the project.** “We plan to install an initial batch of 30 buffers in fields accessible before harvest. By fall, we hope to do a second round, and install the rest of the buffers.” Although the project is still in its early phase and ground has yet to be broken, results so far appear promising. Puls said the goal in the beginning was 25 saturated buffers in the Polk district, which some doubted could be achieved. **“We’re now looking at 80-to-90 completions this year.”**

To read more how the Polk team proceeded with their plan – including identifying the best locations for saturated buffers, convincing landowners to participate, changing the approach to hiring contractors, and current status for this on-going “work in progress” – click here: [Bundling Conservation Infrastructure](#).

Sioux SWCD tree distribution to 3rd-graders rescued from school closings



Every year, the Sioux SWCD gives 3rd Grade students a chance to order two trees from a list of four. Each classroom is given a presentation and handout that shows the students the proper way to plant their trees. This year, 750 trees were ordered in preparation for the tree distribution – an order that could not be cancelled with the nursery. When the coronavirus forced the cancellation of schools for the year, **the Sioux district faced a challenge: how to distribute the trees to the students?**

According to the Mary Nyhof, Sioux SWCD Conservation Assistant, the district reached out by email to all 3rd grade teachers from all schools to organize a class distribution and schedule pickup days. **“We received the trees**



and our office staff individually bagged them at their homes with family members,” says Nyhof. “The office staff delivered trees to every school prior to their students scheduled pickup days. We were glad to see the students receive their trees!” A successful tree distribution effort and important conservation learning experience – made possible by an “all hands on deck” team effort from the staff at Sioux SWCD. Well done! *(Pictured: 3rd graders from Hull Protestant Reformed School in Hull, Iowa)*

Allamakee SWCD awarded CIG funding for cover crops program

The Allamakee County Soil and Water Conservation District announced the award of \$235,907.00 for a three-year project involving interseeding cover crops into V4-V7 Corn. The funding for this project came from the USDA Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) program. Short planting windows after commodity crop harvest has some producers frustrated and looking at other methods of getting cover crops established. One option is interseeding cover crops into corn between the V4-V7 growth stages. Doing this allows cover crops to get established prior to corn canopy. Fifteen producers throughout Allamakee county have stepped forward with interest in participating in the project. They will be using several different seeding methods including no-till drill, broadcast spreader, and an air seeder attached to a modified rotary hoe. Each grower will also be choosing from four different seed mixes including species such as rye grass, buckwheat, brassica, and cow peas. A minimum of four replicated strip trials will be done at each site. The main components of the project will be evaluating yield, cover crop biomass, nutrient uptake, soil microbiology, and soil loss. **The Allamakee Soil and Water Conservation District is one of two conservation districts selected to be a part of the CIG program.** There was a total of 19 projects selected and about \$12.5 million in funds awarded. A large portion of the funds available went to university programs. *Complete story here: [Allamakee SWCD CIG award](#)*