

---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 this issue of **Connections** finds you safe, healthy, and making good progress on harvest.

Thank you to the Districts that submitted their CDI dues for 2020. An additional thank you to those Districts contributing to our scholarship fund; **at the moment we are halfway to our \$10,000 goal.** The scholarship fund is an integral part of our mission, allowing CDI to support the higher education endeavors of Iowa students interested in conservation and agriculture.

This is the time of year that many Districts publish their annual report of finances and programs. Whether you choose to distribute the report via mail, a newspaper article, or you post it on your website, explaining the District's fiscal year raises awareness about the local District and its activities. **If your District does not currently publish an annual report, consider doing so.** Sharing the District's finances, programs, and activities with the public, raises community awareness and encourages them to support conservation efforts. Many Districts also use the report as a timely way request monetary support of the District's programs.

Jon Hubbert named Iowa State Conservationist

US Dept. of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Acting Chief Kevin Norton announced the selection of Jon Hubbert as Iowa's State Conservationist. Hubbert replaces Kurt Simon, who retired at the end of July after serving as State Conservationist in Iowa for nearly five years. Hubbert was formerly the NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs in Iowa. He has been with the federal government agency for 33 years – the past 10 in Iowa. As a member of the NRCS leadership team, Hubbert has led efforts to improve the quality and efficiency of NRCS services. He has also helped improve coordination within the Iowa Conservation Partnership, leading to an increase in voluntary, incentive-based conservation on private lands. Hubbert will oversee a staff of about 500 employees located at more than 100 Iowa offices.



Jon Hubbert
Iowa State Conservationist

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

We are excited to announce that we have added a section to our website for the [S.T.A.R. program](#). On that, you will find information about the program as well as an online version of the Iowa S.T.A.R. Field Form, which when completed will automatically be sent to Program Manager Carlee Sabus. **If you have not checked out our website recently, we urge you to.** When you do, please let us know what you would like to see on it, and we can look at the possibility of adding more features. For the S.T.A.R. program, one of the features we would like to build in the future is an interactive field form so when a producer fills out the form, he/she would be able to see what points they have and what they can do to increase their points. **This could be a great conservation and water quality education tool for us.**

Over the past few months, I have participated in several webinars relating to carbon storage markets and agriculture. I have been concerned that these markets will not be rewarding enough to encourage conservation practices, but one form is emerging that will help: clean fuels. **The concept of low carbon clean fuels is really based in the biofuels we are producing here in the Midwest.** The problem I see is that they are using conservation practices such as no-till and cover crops acres without crediting those practices to the producers. I believe that those practices should not be ‘the base’ but rather that we should be credited for them. **CDI and agricultural groups will continue to be a voice on this issue so that producers receive the credit for conservation that they deserve.**

Congratulations to East Pottawattamie SWCD on being the first district to submit and have approved a new five-year Soil and Water Resource Conservation Plan using the revised SWRCP template. **The CDI Planning Coordinators are ready to help all SWCDs to bring their plans up to date.**

Rotating Cattle, Accessible Water Critical for Overcoming Drought on Pastures

by Jason Johnson, State Public Affairs Specialist, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Iowa

Following a dry Iowa summer where – at its height – more than 20 western Iowa counties fell into an “Extreme Drought,” the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) is encouraging Iowa’s livestock producers to consider adopting weather resilient, long-term drinking water sources, and alternative forage and grazing solutions for their pastures. Currently, about 40 western Iowa counties are in a “Severe Drought” according to the most recent U.S. Drought Monitor. Adequate water and forages continue to diminish for grazing animals, causing producers additional expenses and labor to weather the drought.

Although southeast Iowa livestock producers are enduring dry conditions this year, it’s nothing compared to the extended drought they experienced from 2016 to 2018. Because of that long-term drought, many producers in the area worked with NRCS to implement practices such as livestock pipeline, watering facilities, prescribed grazing and water wells to help overcome drought conditions. Through the NRCS-administered Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Iowa farmers contracted a record \$9.2 million in 2018 for conservation practices that reduce erosion, improve water quality, and boost forage conditions on grass-based grazing operations. “Many southeast Iowa producers reached out to us in 2017 and 2018 expressing a need for assistance on grazing lands,” said Jon Hubbert, State Conservationist for NRCS in Iowa. “We felt a need to help producers protect their grass resources and improve the long-term sustainability of their pastures.”

[Read Jason Johnson’s full report here.](#)

SWCDs: Help put some fun into learning about soil!

An Iowa conservation group is reaching out to Iowa SWCDs with an invitation to **help local children learn about critical sustainability issues through a fun and engaging program: “Game Jam”**. According Barb Giger, a member of the Iowa Conservation Education Coalition (ICEC), the theme of this third Game Jam is “soil health”. Youth teams – grades 3 through 8 -- are challenged to focus on an aspect of soils and to incorporate field investigation data and observations, online data resources, and investigations in a new game idea to teach others what they have learned! Giger says Game Jam offers children a reason to learn about an important issue through a fun format that makes a topic such as soil health more relevant. **Game Jams offer a way to inspire curiosity, creativity, collaboration, optimism, and problem-solving skills in students or youth groups.**

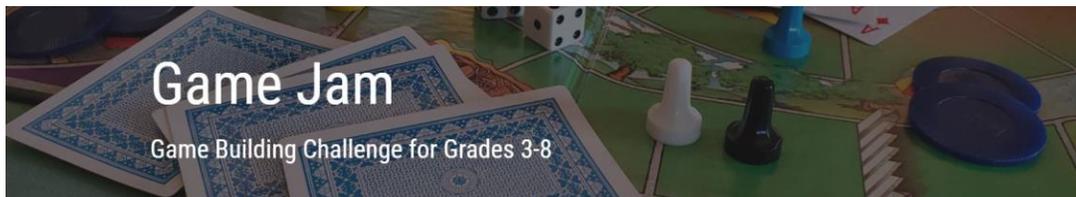
“Whenever you’re developing a game, you have to work together, and think about the whole game – it’s systems thinking, which is incredibly important to solve some of the challenges we face going forward,” says Giger. In the process of cooperating to create a game, “the kids practice problem solving skills while learning about a natural resource, and the conservation of that natural resource.” Teams develop creative game ideas, determine game formats and rules, and then come up with a way to apply the game to the conservation topic.

Giger says **the objective of helping children learn early about soil health synchronizes well with the mission of Iowa’s Soil and Water Conservation Districts**. “If the local SWCD lets their schools know about it, or support their schools in doing the Game Jam, we believe it would provide recognition locally, like the poster contest.” The games the kids develop can take any form, says Giger. “The game may already exist, or they can come up with their own. There are two different types – they can come up with an analog game like a game of tag or board game; or a computer-based game.”



Guthrie Center kids play a round of “River Rush”, the winning entry in the previous Game Jam, with the theme of “Aquatic Ecosystems.” Their game was designed by two 6th-graders.

For the new topic, Game Jam organizers compiled educational activities focused on soil health and provide those to teachers and adult leaders through their website. “We put things together for the educators and what we do is encourage the kids to learn about the topic through these different activities.” Teachers and adult leaders help do research with the team. “Because of this approach,



teachers become more of a facilitator, and so **we start teaching kids how to learn, how to research, how to assimilate information – which are really important skills**. Going forward with

whatever they’re going to do in life, these are things they’re going to need to know how to do. So teachers are not just a conduit of information, they’re actually helping them develop good skills to find out information, and to assess that information and the quality of it.”

Giger says teams typically consist of two-to-five children; one site could have multiple teams. “They can be in school, after school, home-school groups, a 4H group – any sort of youth group. They just need an adult leader or educator who’s in charge of them and can help them through the process.” Educators/leaders can register a team or teams of 2-5 students in two age categories (grades 3-5 and 6-8). **Registration is open November 1, 2020 - January 31, 2021**. Teams must submit a 4-minute video and game description by February 28, 2021, to be judged in the competition. Winning teams will be notified by March 15, 2021. Up to twelve teams will be selected to showcase their games in April. Details for the showcase will be shared when winners are announced. Learn more here: [Soil Game Jam](https://www.icec.org/soil-game-jam). Please reach out with any questions to ICEC at exec@iowaee.org.

Carney and Stierwalt talk S.T.A.R.

A nationwide goal to promote localized conservation

We live in an exciting time to be doing conservation, and that conservation is most effective when it's conducted at the local level. For farmers, "local" means conservation practices done field by field. According to Steve Stierwalt, that's the idea behind **S.T.A.R.** – "**Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources**" – a conservation program branching out from the heart of Illinois to Iowa and Missouri, with more states showing interest.



CDI President Dennis Carney (l.) interviews Steve Stierwalt, former president of the Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts, who was active in creating and promoting S.T.A.R. The 15-minute video interview is available online.

In a video interview with CDI President Dennis Carney, Stierwalt says **the timing to grow S.T.A.R. into a national movement is now.** "The things we as conservation districts do is really hot right now," says Stierwalt. "Conservation groups and farm groups are all about locally led conservation right now. That's what we do!"

Steve and Judi Stierwalt operate a corn and soybean farm near Sadorus, Illinois, in Champaign County where S.T.A.R. got its start. Stierwalt has been active in soil and water conservation districts for many years, both local and statewide, and is the former Illinois state SWCD Association president. "**Generations growing up today – no longer are they just satisfied to think about conservation; our observation is they expect conservation,**" Stierwalt tells Carney. "Because of that, government and industry at all levels are trying to figure out how to respond to that demand for conservation. **S.T.A.R. came about as a response to what is going on right now.**"

The S.T.A.R. program works to facilitate conservation drivers – reasons for producers to introduce conservation practices on select fields. As CDI President, Carney has been actively promoting the rollout of S.T.A.R. in Iowa, with an initial outreach to 25 pilot districts. Earlier this month, he authored a guest column in the Mason City *Globe Gazette* introducing S.T.A.R. and its benefits: [Consumer Demand Drives Conservation](#). **Success of the Iowa S.T.A.R. rollout greatly depends on SWCD district commissioners, tasked with helping recruit landowners and farmers to join the program.** In their conversation, Stierwalt tells Carney that S.T.A.R. can enhance the presence and awareness of SWCDs in their district.

"**What we really value is the local part of what SWCDs bring, so we're hoping that local districts will come on board and be that (local change),**" Stierwalt says. "If a farmer wants to get involved, we're hoping that local SWCD is the conduit." Once the S.T.A.R. recognition signs go up roadside along fields, people notice. "We in conservation struggle in the back, without anyone knowing what we're doing. Now with these S.T.A.R. signs, we can proudly promote the conservation that we are doing, and our neighbors notice, and the nonfarm neighbors notice too. **Nobody understands the breath of what these districts are doing – putting these signs all up across your districts helps raise the level for the districts.**" S.T.A.R. is a free program that asks producers to sign up using the "Iowa S.T.A.R. Field Form", available online on the [CDI website](#). Listen to the [15-minute video conversation between Dennis Carney and Steve Stierwalt](#) to learn more.