

---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

Happy New Year to everyone! January is a natural time to reflect on past accomplishments while setting goals for the approaching season. I hope your continuing efforts in natural resource conservation reward you with a sense of pride and encourage you to make further efforts this year.

During the next two weeks **I will be representing Iowa as CDI's board member at the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) annual meeting**, led by our own Tim Palmer. A number of commissioners from across the state are taking advantage of the event's virtual format and **CDI's offer to pay the registration fees this year**. This will mark the largest attendance from Iowa ever at this event.

During the first week of this two-week event, NACD holds several national board meetings, legislative committee meetings, regional meetings, resolution hearings, and resource policy meetings. In addition, staff reports and a meeting of all state presidents occur. This year, **CDI is presenting a resolution recommending NACD advocate for funding to perform new soil surveys in flood plains of the Midwest** due to major water events during the past twenty years. These flood events have altered both the hydrology and the landscape of these areas, and new surveys are needed to better conduct conservation work and farming activities. The resolution received the full support of NACD's North Central Region at our meeting a couple weeks ago.

During the formal annual meeting, held the second week of the NACD annual meeting, **Iowa will be recognized again as one of the top ten states in NACD dues collected**. In addition, a brief video showcasing Iowa conservation work will be shown in the parade of states exposition. **Best wishes for a successful 2021 and please stay safe out there.**

Reminders, updates and deadlines!

- **CDI Scholarship applications are due February 12.** Please contact your schools to remind them of this deadline! Rules and application forms can be [found here](#).
- **Upper Mississippi River Region and League of Women Voters** will host talks on how local actions can improve soil and water quality in a watershed on February 1, 2021, at 1pm CST. [Click here to access the Zoom meeting invite](#).
- **Team sign-up for "Soil Game Jam 2020-2021" deadline is January 31st.** The theme of the third Game Jam sponsored by the Iowa Conservation Education Coalition (ICEC) is "Soil". Educators / leaders can register a team or teams of 2-5 students in two age categories (grades 3-5 and 6-8). Click here to [learn more about Soil Game Jam and Soils](#). Register your teams [here](#). Questions? Contact ICEC at exec@iowaee.org.

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

The work of local SWCDs could increase in the future. Each new federal administration lays out priorities that it hopes to carry out in their time in office. In early January, CDI leadership along with the leadership of several other state soil and water conservation organizations met virtually with the Washington DC leadership of NACD to discuss how the *Saving Tomorrow's Agricultural Resources (S.T.A.R.)* program could be used to verify any new conservation and water quality efforts of the incoming administration. As you already know, S.T.A.R. started in Illinois and CDI was the first state to join their effort. Now there are four additional states working to join the effort and more considering joining. So far, there are only proposals being talked about by the new administration, but CDI – along with other states' organizations and NACD – want to be ready to help implement conservation programs with our partners.

The newly formed CDI Commissioner Continuing Education Committee is working on a series of video recordings that can be used by all commissioners to either refresh their training on their elected duties, or for new commissioners to pick up important tips that will help them be successful commissioners. Due to pandemic considerations, we are recording the videos on Zoom and doing them in interview style. Not all committee members will participate in all videos, but all will have input. **Our plan is to start releasing those videos in February with the series completed some time this spring.**

Spring regional meetings will be conducted virtually this year. You will not have to travel on bad roads or worry about how long the trip will take. I do understand that you would like to see your fellow commissioners and I will miss seeing all of you but we want to ensure everyone's safety. The virtual meetings will last no longer than 1-1/2 hours and will include partner updates, a CDI update, and a short program. **Election of Regional Directors will be held in regions 2, 5 and 8 for three-year terms.** Alternate Regional Directors serve one-year terms, so elections for alternates will be held in all regions.

Iowa Envirothon moves online for 2021 competition

CDI Program Manager Carlee Sabus announced this month that conducting an in-person *Envirothon* competition this year will not be possible due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. **"This was a hard decision for CDI and our Envirothon coordinators,"** said Sabus. "But we feel this decision is necessary to keep our communities safe and healthy while we further navigate the COVID-19 pandemic."

Sabus said that CDI and Envirothon organizers **"still want to keep the Envirothon spirit alive this year, even if we can't do it in person."** CDI will be creating an online series of tests (similar to the regional events) that will focus on the same four subjects: Forestry, Aquatics, Soils, and Wildlife. **"We are still working out the details on what IT platform we will be hosting the tests on, but we will still allow teams of five to work together on the tests,"**

said Sabus. "As we continue to work on our online solution we will keep everyone updated as more details become available. **We plan to host this online format on April 26th**; we are waiving the registration fee, so **this event will be free for the participants.**" The top five performing teams will have a "final round" that will reflect an oral presentation format, with an award available for the top three performing teams. **The final round of oral presentations must be submitted by May 17;** the subject will be released to the top teams immediately following the results of the online competition. "We will keep everyone informed about the national competition," she said. "They are hoping to have an in-person event, but a final decision has not been reached yet." **Please contact Sabus with questions or concerns: carlee@cdiowa.org.**



Changes, Challenges Highlight 2020-21 Iowa Conservation Efforts

by Jon Hubbert

State Conservationist, USDA-NRCS



To say 2020 was a memorable year is a major understatement. For the nearly 800 USDA-NRCS and partner employees in our offices who help Iowa's private landowners plan and implement conservation, it was not only memorable but also challenging and in some cases life-changing.

First, though, I want to start by introducing myself. My name is Jon Hubbert, and in October 2020 I was named the State Conservationist for Iowa NRCS. I am not a stranger to Iowa, though. Since 2010, I have served as Assistant State Conservationist for Operations, Management and Strategy, and most recently for Programs in Iowa. Prior to coming to Iowa, I was an Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations in northeastern Illinois for six years and a District Conservationist in central Illinois for 17 years prior to that.

With my experience in Iowa, I know the challenges we face. Iowa is one of the most important states for soil and water conservation in the United States, with major rivers bordering us to the east and west coupled with the intensity of row crop farming in between.

With the amount of natural resource conservation needed in Iowa, NRCS has been understaffed here for several years. For this reason, we added about 100 NRCS staff during the past year to help us serve our customers with conservation planning and program delivery now and into the future. With nearly 500 employees, Iowa is second to only Texas in the number of full-time NRCS staff members. Nearly one year ago, we began implementing our staff reorganization. As you may recall, the reorganization is highlighted by one District Conservationist for each of our 100 field offices and 25 four-county resource teams.

The reorganization will take a few years to be fully implemented, for several reasons. First, it is taking some time to find space for all our Resource Team members in our Resource Team office locations. Once building leases expire in Resource Team office locations, it will enable us to expand those locations or find new buildings in those communities with more space. Another obstacle slowing our reorganization rollout has been filling job vacancies. We filled many of our new Resource Team Leader positions internally, and it is taking time to backfill their old positions. A positive for our staff is that the reorganization is providing many new career opportunities.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed the full implementation of our reorganization. Our vision for the reorganization requires a lot of face-to-face interaction, well-defined roles, with a team concept. Most of the team interaction right now is virtual, and although this is our best option for training and communication right now, it is not the same as in-person. On the topic of COVID-19, I am very proud of all we accomplished in 2020. Even without the pandemic, the Iowa NRCS Leadership Team and I knew our staff faced many challenges in 2020. The reorganization meant disruption due to staff movement and changes. We also rolled out several new business planning tools that require training and time to learn.

With all that, we still obligated nearly \$60 million in financial assistance to Iowa farmers during Fiscal Year 2021 and wrote about 12,600 conservation plans to treat resource concerns on nearly 900,000 acres. That's remarkable, considering the many obstacles our staff and conservation partners faced in 2020. Moving on to 2021, our priorities must continue to be effective conservation planning and implementation, program delivery and conservation compliance. To do those effectively, training and mentoring our new employees during 2021 will be vital to our future success. We also need to implement our reorganization as best we can by improving communications, staffing open positions, and improving our staff expertise and efficiency through training.

Lastly, we must continue to find ways to engage and partner with the Farm Service Agency (FSA), the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS), local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD), and other private and public conservation interest groups to help us implement conservation in Iowa. I am excited about the opportunity to be the State Conservationist in Iowa. Please don't hesitate to reach out to me personally if you have any questions or concerns.

Carney and Whitaker:

Legislature brings challenges, opportunities (& more challenges)

The 2021 Iowa Legislature is now in session. CDI President Dennis Carney and Executive Director John Whitaker weigh-in on what districts may – or may not – expect from this session.

Soil Health

John Whitaker: “There’s been a group of bipartisan legislators that have been working since last year on a soil health bill – but there’s some push back by some who consider it a ‘mandate’. I believe that bill is going to be introduced. If we had policy on it, it would be very good for Iowa. It’s a bill that may come up that we should watch for that would deal with soil health for districts in their responsibilities.” The bill is specifically targeted to districts 161A Section of the Code – and a resolution backing the idea was supported by nearly 80% of Iowa district commissioners who voted.

Iowa Water Land and Legacy Trust Fund

Dennis Carney: “Seventy percent of Iowa voters approve an increased sales tax to support the ‘Iowa Water Land and Legacy Trust Fund’, but the legislature has sat on it for 10 years. That’s at the top of our list. It originally passed in a 2007 constitutional amendment, passed in ‘07 and ‘09.”

John Whitaker: “Between 63-64 percent of voters then approved the amendment in 2010, an extreme anti-tax year, and most of the voters thought they were actually implementing that sales tax. But the legislature never touched it.”

Environment First Fund

John Whitaker: “All gaming money flows into an infrastructure fund and from there the ‘Environment First Fund’ is funded; and then that goes into soil conservation. The government did request that soil conservation funds stay the same; we as CDI and the state had requested a doubling of soil conservation. There’s a lot of work to be done in soil conservation and we support the state increasing their efforts. With the water quality issues we have in Iowa, we need to put our money where our mouth is.”

Urban Conservation

Dennis Carney: “The legislature never invests any money in urban. IDALS asks for a million in urban conservation funding just to get something going and it ends up being zeroed out.”

John Whitaker: “That’s even more important this year because of rumors a bill may be introduced that removes local control on storm water runoff during construction – that state and local could not be any more restrictive than federal runoff – which means how fast can water get out of here and what can it carry with it. That’s very bad for flooding, very bad for water quality.”

Reaching Out to Lawmakers

John Whitaker: “In order of effect: #1, district commissioners should host a legislative forum that’s public with their local legislator. If you can’t do that, then #2: go to a public forum and *ask* about conservation. There are public forums every weekend somewhere. Ask, ‘Where are you going to go on this issue’ – that way they know where you stand. #3: Phone calls. #4: Hand-written letters. Emails are the bottom of the list – your legislator will never know you contacted them.”

Dennis Carney: Some of the districts involved currently in the 5-year planning process should make sure you involve legislators in your Local Working Group. They’ll hear directly what other people in the community think and believe about conservation issues.”

John Whitaker: “You won’t hear from your legislators if they don’t hear from you.”