

---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 look forward to seeing you next week at our virtual Spring Regional meetings. In 2020 we completed only two meetings before the pandemic compelled us to end our gatherings. I will miss travelling around the state for this series of get-togethers, and hopefully many of you will tune in to hear reports from both CDI staff and our partner agencies.

In addition, **we will be electing CDI Board members from Regions 2, 5, and 8;** each region will also elect alternate directors. If you are interested in becoming involved in CDI at the next level, please contact your director or the CDI office prior to your Spring Regional meeting.

The CDI Board met last week to establish dates of upcoming events and review our progress on a variety of programs. **One of CDI's most important services to districts is the resolution process.** Your district can effect change to both CDI and government programs through a resolution that addresses a soil or water quality concern. This year's **deadline for [resolution submission](#) to CDI is April 1, 2021.** Please contact CDI staff or me with questions concerning a specific resolution idea.

Finally, please continue to stay informed on the rapidly advancing field of soil health and carbon sequestration. Agriculture will play a major role in this sphere and now that the federal government is taking the major problems caused by climate change more seriously, **there will be increased responsibility and funding headed our way.** This can be a very positive thing for those of us in production agriculture. I look forward to seeing you at the Spring Regional meeting.



IOWA WATER 20 CONFERENCE 21

building resilience for water and people
Virtual Event April 6-8, 2021

- 80+ speakers from Iowa and throughout the Midwest
- 70+ presentations on emergent water topics
- 3 virtual tours

[Click here for program and registration.](#)

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

If you do not have your Spring regional meeting marked on your calendar, please mark it now. I would rather be in person with you but given the current pandemic, that will not be possible this year, so I hope to ‘see’ you on the Zoom format.

The CDI Board of Directors has approved a **new award for an “Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District”**. There are many SWCDs that do an outstanding job of promoting conservation, while improving water quality and soil health and the efforts of those districts deserve to be recognized. Please go to our website and find [the form to make a nomination](#). You may self-nominate your district or maybe a neighboring district.

We are again offering all the awards we have in the past and you can find those nomination forms on our website in the [‘Recognition’](#) section.

As noted in last month’s *Connections*, **we are producing a series of educational/training videos for your use**. We have five posted so far and more will be posted soon. You can find them on our website in the [‘Get Involved’](#) section.

Envirothon will be held virtually this year and only on a statewide format. The National Envirothon competition which was scheduled to be held in Lincoln, Nebraska, in July has also been moved to a virtual format.

We have begun to prepare for **our Annual Conference to be held August 23rd and 24th this year**. Our plan was to be in person at the Gateway in Ames, but again – given the pandemic – **the CDI board has voted for a virtual format** again in 2021. This year, we will offer much more than just the business meeting as we did last year. **We will have several exciting breakout sessions on current topics along with exciting speakers**. When the Annual Conference Planning Committee met, the group proposed 16 possible breakout sessions. Obviously, we will not have enough time for all of them but that does give you an idea of the number of timely topics we could discuss.

Five-Year Soil & Water Resource Conservation Planning

Districts find ease-of-use, easy access with virtual format

CDI Planners helping Iowa SWCDs develop state mandated five year “Soil and Water Resource Conservation” plans report **success and continued progress using the “Zoom” platform** as a district board and community communications tool. “Zoom has been instrumental in progressing in the 5-year planning process,” says Claire Carlson, CDI Planner for Northeast Iowa. **“Not only is accessing a Zoom meeting simple, but it is also convenient.** By hosting meetings in this way, participation has increased and so has the input received. Participants who may be working at their day job can simply log on to a Zoom meeting without leaving the comfort of their desk – same can be said of one’s couch!”



According to CDI Southeast Iowa Planner Nate Kilburg, **any district commissioner or staff can request assistance in getting started with Zoom.**

“As more and more districts are beginning to adopt Zoom, the convenience and accessibility of using a video conferencing application can’t be overstated,” says Kilburg. “You can use Zoom for all sorts of professional events, meetings, and even for social occasions as well! If getting started with Zoom is your biggest worry, **I would be more than happy to help you get started.**”

In Northeast Iowa, Claire Carlson reports that **14 districts are currently in the process of completing their 5-year plans or have completed their plans** thanks to their willingness to try out this way of meeting. “Moving forward, I believe that Zoom meetings will continue to be a convenient way for individuals to eventually access in-person meetings, furthering communication about conservation and **increasing participation at all meetings.**”

Q&A with outgoing NACD President Tim Palmer

“I’d like to think we’ll work ourselves out of a job...”

Tim Palmer recently completed his term as president of the National Association of Conservation Districts – Iowa’s own major voice in the nationwide conservation movement. Palmer’s corn, soybeans and cattle farm near Truro, Iowa, includes numerous conservation practices – cover crops, no-till, grassed waterways, terraces and forage rotations.

What would you say were the highlights of your leadership time with NACD?

The main goal I had was to make sure everyone felt part of the organization. I wanted to convey the idea to 17000 soil and water conservation officials that this was *their* organization. **We wanted everyone to feel like they could talk to the leadership of NACD, from any perspective.** Any time you can get together with a group of people that are there for the same reason you are, that’s a highlight! Before Covid hit, I was traveling two and three times a month to different states, sitting in on their meetings, being part of their state association. The number of people that I was lucky enough to be with, as a farmer myself, **I know it was important for them to see I’m one of them** – I was dealing with things on the land, and I was there for the value of the friendships that I made.



Former NACD President Tim Palmer, on his farm operation near Truro

What message would you share with the districts of Iowa?

The more you can be involved, the more you’ll understand **‘showing up’ does make a difference, ‘being there’ does make a difference.** And having friends in many circles does make a difference when you’re out there looking for support for something that needs fixed in your own county and district. **We’re going to see a place for conservation districts to be able to do some valuable service through the environmental service market.** We don’t have to make anything up when it comes to knowing what water quality is or managing for flooding; we can build wetlands; we can do nutrient management practices. We have to work with our equipment managers, our seed suppliers to make sure that they’re designing processes or coating or fertilizers that work with and expand our vision of nutrient management.

Looking forward in time – what do you think is ahead for NACD?

I’d like to think we’ll work ourselves out of a job, but I don’t think it’s going to happen anytime soon. There’s such a spotlight on our ability to affect carbon. **We know the cheapest way to put carbon in the ground is to let plants do it** and if we can figure out a way for producers to be comfortable with changes that allow that to happen, **all these things are transitions that are going to help overall with soil health.** But until they start adding in the extra practices like nutrient management and cover crops – anything that’s going to keep things green and growing longer out of the season or beyond the season – the downside is going to affect everyone drastically.

Rethinking that invite list to Field Days

Reaching ‘Middle Adopters’ means creative targeting

When Jodi Hitz and her local partners in Cover Crop Champions organized a “Cover Crop Field Day” last fall, she felt good about the quality of the program they had organized. **“We had really good presenters lined up,”** says Hitz. “We had farmers who had used cover crops for years ready to demonstrate to farmers why haven’t tried cover crops and who might be more receptive” when hearing the benefits from peers. **“But only three farmers showed up who hadn’t tried it.”** Though they hadn’t reached the audience they sought, Hitz says what followed that day was a deep conversation among presenters and farmers about “targeting” – **rethinking strategies to reach those “Middle Adopter” producers** who are most open to learning about the benefits of conservation practices on the farm.



Project Manager Jodi Hitz

Jodi Hitz is Project Coordinator for the North Thompson River Watershed in Adair, Madison and Union counties, headquartered in Creston, and was active in the Cover Crops Champion program in 2020. Hitz says the conversation that day encourages her – and she hopes, others – to expand our thinking about how to reach Middle Adopters. Hitz says the producers at her Field Days event concluded that it takes more than an invite to get the attention of Middle Adopters.



Lunch break at a Union County Field Day, sponsored by Jodi Hitz and others with Cover Crop Champions

“Everyone pretty much agreed that **middle adopters won’t usually show up for a field day**—it’s more neighbors, friends, and family talking to them that will change their minds,” says Hitz. **“So we need to make sure those folks are equipped to talk about soil health.** One strategy would be to have a group discussion – have them get together every other month for coffee, and just talk about soil health, cover crops, what they’re doing, what’s working, different ideas. I think that might help reach some of these that are on the fence whether to do it or not.”

There may be conflicts with some invitees – not all ag retailers or agronomists may completely commit to cover crops for professional reasons. But there may be opportunities we miss, such as crop adjusters. **“Instead of targeting strictly ag service professionals, we should try to educate crop adjusters** about this. They experience differences in soil health firsthand.” Another possible target: farm managers. “That’s a good audience, too. We should encourage expanding who we’re talking to. Instead of just going down the same track we’ve always gone down, ‘We’ll have a field day, we’ll invite producers’, maybe we need to start targeting these other groups of people.”