

# ---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.



April 2021  
Volume 2, Number 7

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### From: CDI President Dennis Carney

**Happy spring!** Fieldwork is upon us and you have my best wishes for a safe and productive season.

I hope you and your districts celebrate **Soil and Water Conservation Week** with newspaper articles, student contests, posters, and more. Commissioners have an exciting story to tell and the sense of urgency in what we do grows each year.

In an effort to add soil health verbiage to the Iowa Code, **your CDI Board and Officers supported HF801 in the Iowa Legislature** over the past month. In the end, we were unsuccessful; hopefully we increased awareness of this needed change among our lawmakers. NRCS will be using soil health parameters moving forward and we believe it is important that state regulations reflect current science. Misinformation and opposition from producer groups prevented the bill from moving forward. **As with so many things in our field, more education is required.**

Remember to check-out the [commissioner training videos](#) posted on the CDI website. Also, let CDI know what your districts are doing to protect our natural resources so we can share it with other districts through the *Connections* newsletter. **Best wishes for a safe spring season.**



<https://iowaagriculture.gov/soil-and-water-conservation-week>

## Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

We are building the agenda for the **CDI annual conference to be held August 23 and 24**. I, like the rest of us, really wish that we could be in person this year. I miss the opportunity to interact with everyone face-to-face. Unfortunately, we cannot risk the financial consequences of possibly having to cancel after the ‘cancellation deadline’ in our hotel contract. **So even though we will be virtual again in 2021, the annual conference will be more like normal.** This year, we will run the usual day and a half+ timeframe with several informative breakout sessions. We also plan to have a trade show for vendors but are still working out how to make this happen.

When the annual conference planning committee met to discuss **possible breakout sessions**, there were several great ideas – too many, in fact. When we finished compiling the list, we had 16 possible sessions. We surveyed the committee to determine to pick the top 8 which we believe is a reasonable number. Although final titles for each session will be determined by the presenters, the following are the general themes: “Healthy soils can store carbon”, “Grazing cover crops for soil health”, “Conservation leases”, “Urban farming”, “Establishing pollinator habitat for all seasons”, “Women in conservation”, “Telling your conservation story”, and “The S.T.A.R. program”.

Awards are always a highlight of the annual conference so please be sure to nominate those deserving individuals and districts for the great work they are doing. **Remember the new award, Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District**, should be sent to the CDI office this year instead of to IDALS like the rest. **This is a great opportunity to recognize a district that is doing outstanding work.**

## NRCS Adds May 7 EQIP Application Shut-off for Iowa Farmers

**Iowa farmers interested in signing up to implement conservation practices on their farms have until May 7 to apply for USDA’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).** The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is accepting applications at USDA Service Centers statewide. Through EQIP, the NRCS provides conservation planning and financial assistance to implement conservation practices such as no-till, cover crops, terraces, grassed waterways, nutrient management, manure management facilities, and pasture management.

This signup is the second for EQIP in Iowa during Fiscal Year 2021. NRCS held a December 2020 signup for Iowa agricultural producers. “We are seeking additional applications for many of our conservation initiatives and targeted conservation efforts,” said Jeff Matthias, Acting EQIP Coordinator for Iowa NRCS. The May 7 signup cutoff includes all potential EQIP applications. Specific targets include livestock-related applications such as pasture improvements, along with targeted conservation efforts such as the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI), Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watershed Initiative (MRBI), Prairie Pothole Water Quality Initiative, Organic Initiative, and Wildlife Habitats Initiative including pollinator plantings and forestry.

In addition, Iowa NRCS is seeking applications for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP-EQIP) Fox River Water Quality Project in Appanoose, Davis, and Van Buren Counties in southeast Iowa. Interested applicants should contact their local NRCS office. Due to the pandemic, USDA offices are currently open to visitors by appointment only. Visitors are encouraged to call ahead. More information related to USDA’s COVID response and relief for producers can be found at [farmers.gov/coronavirus](https://farmers.gov/coronavirus)

What does it take to pull off a statewide high school contest online?

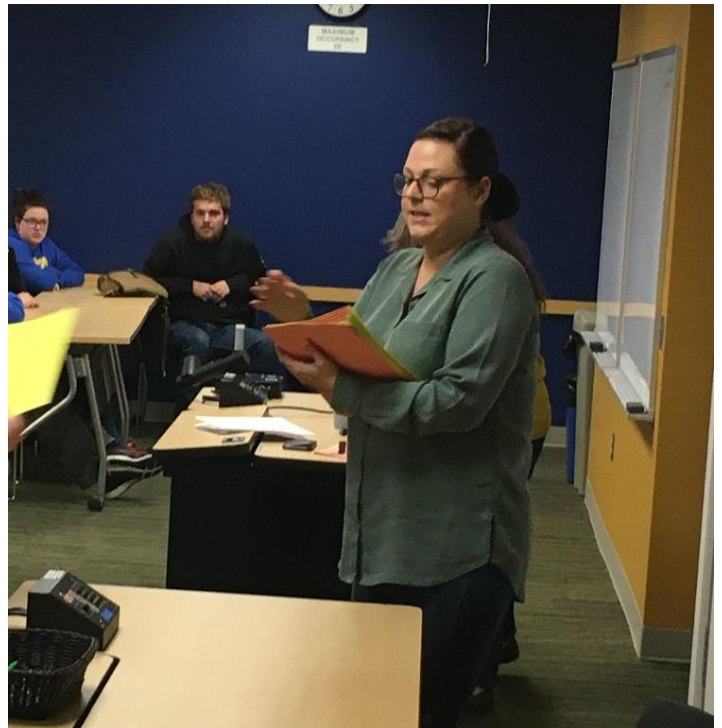
## Envirothon goes virtual – and young Iowa environmentalists are ready



Forty-four teams from high schools across Iowa will soon each huddle together around a computer screen to compete in the Iowa Envirothon, sponsored by CDI. And for the first time, the event – **scheduled for Monday, April 26<sup>th</sup>** – will be held exclusively online. Program Manager Carlee Sabus worked to successfully research and secure the right technology, the right test-support team, and the final drafts of four environmentally focused quizzes to challenge young minds.

“There was not much of a choice but to go virtual again this year,” says Sabus. “Last year, we got half of our regionals done and then Covid shut everything down.” The registration fee was waived this year, so the event is free for participants. **Teams may include up to five persons in grades 9-12, ages 14-19.** Envirothon helps high school students cultivate a desire to learn more about our natural resources through competitive events. **Teams take four tests – wildlife, aquatic ecology, forestry, and soils/land use** – which offer in-depth explorations of current environmental issues that affect our natural resources. Competition starts locally, with winners moving on for a chance at participating in the national event, managed by the [National Conservation Foundation](#) in Washington, D.C.

To pull off the statewide event first required finding the right IT platform. “I researched what online platforms would work best for taking a test, something to make it easy to send out links to advisors,” says Sabus. “I wanted something that was really straight forward.” While her platform research was underway, **she sought local conservation experts to help create the tests.** “We looked to find people that have the time and knowledge to be able to create a good test, because it’s a challenge since it’s for high school – for a lot of us, it’s been awhile! We had them send me the questions and I ran through them. I would add some, take some away, do some editing – then put it on the platform and its ready to go!” Sabus also updated [the online Study Guide](#), used by the teams to prepare for the event.



*CDI Program Manager Carlee Sabus directs the action at a 2020 Regional Envirothon contest -- just before the Covid shutdown*

Watch a [90-second video](#) from an Iowa ag education instructor, sharing the benefits of Envirothon to her students.

Nationally, the Envirothon theme is “healthy forests” – not particularly relatable to most of Iowa. Sabus said the tests will cover healthy forests, but also focus on conservation issues more in line with Iowa issues. When test day arrives, **Sabus will open the platform for team access at midnight, April 26<sup>th</sup>, and close at 11:55 p.m.** “We hope that gives flexibility for kids to work on it. I give them a 30-minute limit per test, similar to the regionals. They can go back and change answers but can only take it once.” Advisors are asked to be present with students during test-taking (to avoid those tempting Google searches!). “The top five teams will do an oral presentation, and they’ll make a video of that and send it to our judging panel. We give the top teams two weeks to prepare the oral.” **The final round of oral presentations must be submitted by May 17.** That final Iowa winning team advances to nationals, which is also online.



## Planner Profile: Claire Carlson, CDI Planner for NE Iowa

For Claire Carlson, “it took a while to appreciate nature.” But when the moment came, “I did a complete 180 on my life!” Claire was a student at the University of Iowa when her “environmental side” captured her passion. That discovery led Claire through the educational and real-world experience that uniquely prepared her as facilitator for 24 northeast Iowa SWCDs in the **creation and execution of their five-year “Soil and Water Resource Conservation Plan”**.



CDI NE Planner Claire Carlson

Growing up on a conservation-minded family farm raising Black Angus cattle in Wapello County outside Ottumwa, Claire’s “massive life changes” at 19- and 20-years-old led her into a deep dive of environmental-focused action. She changed majors from business to geology, spent her college years devoted to science in the classroom and in the field, and **spent summers doing groundwork for Iowa conversation programs – literally.**

“It was a great time,” says Carlson. **“I experienced amazing trips with the geology department.** I was able to go on a few awesome experiential learning opportunities in that major.” Her first dip into the conservation realm was in southwest Florida for the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF). **“I worked there for a summer at a marine lab, looking at macroalgae as a potential tool for nutrient sequestration in the bay** I was working in. It had great potential as a project for the conservation organization I was working with; maybe they could implement this to help reduce nitrates and phosphorus because when I was there red tide was at its worst” – a neurotoxin that often leads to massive fish kills and can cause health problems for humans.

***“Everyone in the state is doing this collaborative thing, so you’re not in it alone. I think this will seriously have a profound impact on the state of Iowa and conservation within it.” – Claire Carlson***

“Then I worked for the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation the following summer doing statewide conservation, **traveling around the state, living in a tent and doing manual labor.** And last year, for the whole year, had an AmeriCorps internship in Johnson county with Burr Oak Land Trust – more manual labor!” In the spring of her final year at college, the professional job search became serious. A month after

graduating in May 2020 from the University of Iowa, she was asked to join the five-member CDI Planner team. **“That I was able to find a job in a field I was interested in a month after graduation was truly a blessing,”** she says, especially because that spring of 2020 was a challenging period for new graduates in the job market. “When CDI called me back at four o’clock on a Friday, I’m thinking, ‘No one does this, this is going to work out because this never happens!’”

In the challenging year of 2020 and into the first months of 2021, Claire Carlson has succeeded in securing trust and progress with each new SWCD she meets. “One of the things that brings value to our work with districts is the collective effort. This is not just one county doing something, **we have quite a few counties that have their plans done that are already working towards their goals.** I just got off a meeting with a district today that’s already starting to implement them! I think just because all the SWCDs in the state are doing these plans, that’s what’s going to make it successful.” Carlson emphasizes the many opportunities that arise out of this planning process. “So many people have either reconnected or have now met for the first time, or have heard someone say, ‘I really want to become involved in implementing these goals’, that it just has created even more drive to push forward, to start integrating conservation, integrating a collaborative sense of work for each district.” [Click here to watch Claire’s “Five Year SWRCP Overview”](#)

She believes her work has opened people’s eyes to the fact they’re not alone in wanting to achieve better conservation or better land protection within the state. “In a sense we all understand that, but until you actually start meeting with people who are also working towards the same goals as you are, you don’t realize it.” For those district commissioners she has yet to meet, Claire believes momentum grows as word of progress emerges from neighboring district planning. **“I’m looking forward to meeting everyone and hope they’re as excited as me to get going.** This may be a bit more energy intensive than some of their previous goals, but in the grand scheme of things everyone in the state is doing this collaborative thing, so you’re not in it alone. I think this will seriously have a profound impact on the state of Iowa and conservation within it.”