

# ---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 Ramona Nitz

As your new CDI President, I am happy to have this opportunity to tell you about myself. I am a Soil and Water Commissioner from Cherokee County. I have served on the CDI Board since 2016. I live in Cherokee and my husband and I farm in northern Cherokee County and in southern O'Brien County. We also raise cattle. I am a graduate of the University of South Dakota with a degree in Education and have taught U.S. Government, American History and Spanish at the middle school and high school levels. I am currently retired from teaching. On Saturday afternoons in the Fall, you will find us cheering on our Cyclones if we are not in the field!

I am looking forward to getting to know you, Iowa's Soil and Water commissioners. And I am looking forward to working with the current CDI Board of Directors. These directors that you, the commissioners, have elected to represent you are very important to the workings of CDI. Future issues of this newsletter will feature each of them so that you will better know the folks throughout the state that will be making decisions on your behalf.

Many of you are already in the fields for harvest. Others (like us) will be soon. Please, stay safe and healthy during this very busy time.

## Deadline Approaches for 2021 Hugh Hammond Bennett Award Nominations

The National Conservation Planning Partnership (NCP) is accepting nominations for the **2021 Hugh Hammond Bennett Award for Conservation Excellence!** The deadline for nominations is Friday, October 1. NCP created the Hugh Hammond Bennett Award for Conservation Excellence in 2017 to honor the legacy of Hugh Hammond Bennett by recognizing producers and conservation planners from within the NCP partnership who have exemplified outstanding service through development and implementation of sound conservation planning and other conservation techniques.

There are two award categories: The **Producer Award** will be presented to a producer who demonstrates a commitment to conservation planning, pioneering new opportunities and leadership in the community. The **Conservation Planner Award** is independent of the producer award and will be given to an individual who demonstrates a high standard of conservation planning and implementation for customers as well as sharing his/her expertise with others. For more information and to submit a nomination, please click here: [2021 Hugh Hammond Bennett Award](#).

## Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

Last month, I mentioned that CDI is one of the sponsors of the Drake University Soil Conference. This conference has been postponed until November 17<sup>th</sup>, so you do have time to register and attend. One of the benefits we received as a sponsor is a \$25 discount for commissioners to attend the conference. CDI members who have attended in the past have said that this is an excellent conference packed with good information about soil health, soil conservation, and water quality. You can register at the following link:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/soil-2021-our-soils-our-future-tickets-164899134751>

Program Director Carlee Sabus and I contacted one farm management company to discuss S.T.A.R. and the possible use of this program for conservation measurement in farm leases. The person we spoke with told us about another third-party conservation verification system that is trying to start specifically targeting rented land. The problem with that system is that they are asking the producer (tenant) to pay a fee to participate. In my opinion, this will make S.T.A.R. a better system for producers as it is free to them. Please discuss S.T.A.R. with your local office to make sure they are aware of the program, but remember this is a CDI program and we are not asking the local office to do the work.

I attended the celebration of the construction of the 100<sup>th</sup> CREP site in Iowa. CREP (Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program) is a state designed program that utilizes the CRP program to accomplish specific conservation goals. In Iowa, CREP is used to build constructed wetlands to improve water quality. This program is only available in 38 districts that are in the ‘Des Moines Lobe’ land formation but similar constructed wetlands are available statewide through IDALS funding or through CRP practice 39. If you have the chance, visit one of these sites to see the good water quality work they accomplish.

## Plymouth County SWCD Celebrates 75th Anniversary

Seventy-five years ago, Plymouth County established the Plymouth County Soil and Water Conservation District and elected three commissioners to oversee the funding and implement action to prevent soil erosion. On Monday August 23<sup>rd</sup> the SWCD celebrated its anniversary with a tour of the Perry Creek Dairy from representatives Scott Thoms



*Perry Dairy during the Plymouth 75th Anniversary tour.*

and Scott Feuerhelm. The group traveled to Hole N’ the Wall at Akron. The “Marsh Madness” wetland trailer from ISU Learning



*Plymouth SWCD Commissioners. L-to-R: Tony Schroeder; Joe Cain, Treasurer; Chairperson Steve Tonsfeldt, Assistant Nancy Anderson; VP Bob Puetz, Jeff Peterson, Assistant Mark Brown*

Farms was available for the attendees to view and participate. The evening ended with a banquet with Commission VP Bob Puetz giving the evening’s program and recognition of past Environmental Leaders from Plymouth County. Chairperson Steve Tonsfeldt gave a presentation of the District’s beginnings, history, and current

mission. The Commissioners and staff also were recognized with an “Outstanding Contribution to the Water Quality Initiative” from Will Myers, Bureau Chief for Field Services of the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship.

A message from CDI President Nitz and Vice President Thornsberry  
***New CDI Leadership: “reconnect ... engage ... listen”***



*President Ramona Nitz*

CDI President Ramona Nitz and VP Jeri Thornsberry commit to work as a team alongside board members with the common goal of energizing the potential of all 500 commissioners to not only increase the number of conservation practices installed in Iowa but also to extend our legislative influence. We are so proud of how the districts stepped up and changed their business practices this past year. Monthly meetings were held on Zoom. Project coordinators became more effective by scheduling appointments with producers after gathering needed documents. More conservation plans were created. Many districts completed their 5-year plans. Interestingly enough, the numbers of public participants increased as it was easier to jump on a Zoom call than to jump in the car to drive to a meeting!

Partnership meetings were held by Zoom as well and real progress has been made to demonstrate that SWCD Districts are equal partners with both IDALS and NRCS. At the state level, Governor Kim Reynolds launched the Iowa Carbon Sequestration Task Force. Reynolds serves as chair and Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig serves as vice-chair. This task force will explore carbon sequestration and the opportunities it presents for further economic development in Iowa. Task force members include key stakeholders representing industries and interests integral to the carbon sequestration supply chain in Iowa. CDI Leadership and Secretary Naig are in ongoing discussions about our contributions to this effort. The work the task force is doing is very critical given the severe weather events we are experiencing. CDI is also working with the NACD Climate Action Task Force chaired by Tim Palmer, a commissioner in Madison County and former NACD president. This committee is made up of inside and outside influencers. Their mission is to firmly place Conservation



*V.P. Jeri Thornsberry*

Districts and our partners in the conversation to use our experience to have a positive effect on climate and to support the current administration’s conservation goals.

***“And now as the days grow shorter, there is a new energy in the air.”***

To undertake this mission of reengagement, we intend to increase communication with every commissioner and to expand interactions between the board, our regional directors, and commissioners as well. We all need to step up our communication within our counties so that SWCDs become more well known. We do good work and we need to brag about it more. We have been through a truly gut-wrenching experience these last 18 months or so with Covid. And now as the days grow shorter, there is a new energy in the air. The sky looks different; the leaves begin their great transformation revealing a riotous array of colors. We anticipate a bountiful harvest. Autumn truly is magical. And we see that now is the time to reconnect, to engage with each of you, to listen to your concerns and to encourage your participation to continue the good work that President Dennis Carney began.

So, as we begin working towards these goals of increased interaction and communication, our November 16, 2021 CDI Board Meeting will be held in person at the new CDI Office at 2015 Grand Avenue, Basement Level, Des Moines, IA 50312. We will be seated in a responsibly socially distant manner and everyone is encouraged to wear a face mask so we protect each other. The agenda for this board meeting will be different. We plan to collectively engage in an in-depth interactive conversation about our different roles and responsibilities, to discuss our collective vision for CDI and to develop personalized action plans. Let’s make some magic happen during this season.

**...At your service, Ramona and Jeri**



**A process using cement briquettes and mesh to grow green cover for erosion control**

*Trying something new in East Pott*

A process to help control soil erosion in the East Pottawattamie district is proving to be a success so far – although at the time of installation, fingers were crossed, the process was unproven locally and required some lobbying on the part of district commissioners and staff to initiate.

Silver Creek in East Pott was flooding a local farmer’s field, according to East Pott SWCD Commissioner and CDI Region 1 Director Bob Zimmerman. “We had a terrible cutback off this river going back into the farmer’s field and taking ground,” he says. “We got hold of a company that molds these cement briquettes into a fiber mesh. You shape it, you lay this down in rolls, stake it, put seed over top of it or underneath it, and the grass will grow right up through it – and it will stop the erosion.” The process Zimmerman describes is called FlexaMat®, manufactured in Cincinnati, Ohio. The technology packages concrete erosion mats into rolls that can successfully achieve fully vegetated concrete erosion mats. The technology is not new, but this is a first-time use for the East Pott SWCD.

“This field had 80 acres in it, there’s also water comes across from other fields that flows down through there, so it’s going to find the river one way or another,” says Zimmerman. “We decided this would be a great demonstration plot because it’s only about a hundred yards off the gravel road. It’s more than just going in and putting in a tube and a structure, but hopefully it’s a more economically and environmentally friendly situation.”

East Pott District Conservationist Terry Gleaves, who actively helped pitch the idea to local and state parties, says the FlexaMat process has promise for other types of water erosion control. “We need to have other options. Seems like we do the same type of projects, whether it’s a pipe or flow structure. We wanted another option for people. There will be times when this option will be a lot cheaper than alternatives.” Getting the go-ahead required some diplomacy, according to Zimmerman. “We had to talk the landowner into it. It wasn’t proven, but we were willing to put our necks on the line a little bit to see that it would be a good project.” Approval to move ahead came from NRCS. “I credit them for approving,” says Zimmerman. “We all worked pretty hard to see that it did go through. We think it has a lot of potential and downriver community benefits.”



*Top to bottom: Shaping the ditch; laying down FlexaMat® bricks; vegetation growing through mesh; view down chute toward river.*

# The benefits of cover crops

**By Lara Schenck, Practical Farmers of Iowa**

Traditional corn-soybean crop rotations can offer predictability with regards to management practices. However, while corn leaves a large amount of residue, soybeans contribute very little, leaving soil vulnerable to erosion. Couple this with fall tillage practices, and the resulting bare fields become more susceptible to soil and nutrient losses leading to loss of productivity. One method that farmers can use to prevent these losses is to grow cover crops. Cover crops are any grasses, legumes, brassicas, small grains, or other species that are planted between cash crop seasons. Cover crops are typically planted such that they germinate during the fall to provide soil stability during the winter. Upon reaching spring, the cover crops are terminated, but their residue provides nutrients for the upcoming cash crops.



**September S.T.A.R. Update**

Planting cover crops is a boon to livestock farmers looking to supplement their hay supplies. Cover crops can extend the grazing season, making the livestock farmer less dependent upon hay during the winter months. With proper management, cover crops can serve as a food source while reducing soil and nutrient losses. Livestock manure and trampling will also incorporate organic matter into the soil. If the establishment of a grazing system is not possible, livestock farmers may mechanically harvest the cover crop as hay or haylage. However, removing the cover crop also removes nutrients which may need replaced.

Farmers looking to reduce input costs can consider cover crops as a cheap alternative to herbicides and fertilizers owing to their ability to suppress weeds and fix or capture nitrogen. Cover crops can suppress annual and perennial weed populations through competition for light, water and nutrients as well as through the release of allelopathic compounds that interfere with weed seed germination. Adding legumes to a cover crop mix will enable it to fix nitrogen from the atmosphere, reducing reliance upon nitrogen fertilizers. Other cover crop species can scavenge residual nitrates in the soil, reducing nutrient losses and providing nutrients to future cash crops.

In addition to their practical uses, cover crops offer many environmental benefits. These living plants protect the surface of the soil by intercepting raindrops and slowing surface runoff. The roots of the cover crop improve soil structure, making it less prone to erosion and compaction, and allow for better water infiltration into the soil profile. Adding cover crops into a traditional corn-soybean rotation can also help increase the organic component of the soil thereby increasing its capacity to store nutrients. Decomposing organic matter also improves soil biodiversity and supports beneficial soil organisms that help improve soil tilth, infiltration and nutrient availability.

Cover crops are a useful tool for improving soil health, increasing crop productivity, and providing feed for livestock. In addition to these benefits, cover crops are economical, beneficial to the environment by reducing erosion and reliance on potential crop protectants, and improve farm resiliency by reducing inputs while maintaining or improving yields.

## Taking S.T.A.R. statewide

**Carlee Sabus, CDI Program Manager**

As some of you might have heard, CDI is moving forward from our initial STAR (Saving Today's Agricultural Resources) pilot program of 25 selected counties to statewide starting in the Fall 2021 harvest season. Funded by the Walton Foundation, our goal is to have 25 new counties signed up by the end of year 2022, with a goal of 10 individual fields per county. In an effort to reach more interested farmers, we will be having a monthly STAR update accompanied by an educational article about some of the conservation practices that are in the STAR field form. You can access the STAR field form on our website [here](#). If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me, Carlee Sabus, at [carlee@cdiowa.org](mailto:carlee@cdiowa.org).