

---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 you know, we've not been able to meet for our annual conference for two years now. It is at those in-person conferences that we've always held the auctions to raise funds for our scholarship fund. Last year, we asked each district to donate directly to the fund so that we could continue to present the state scholarships, as usual. It was a little disappointing that we did not raise enough to totally cover the cost of these scholarships and had to use other funds to supplement the monies donated. It'd sure be great if we could raise all we need this year.

I've been fortunate to serve on the CDI Scholarship Committee for the last few years. As Region 1 Director, I always enjoyed reading all the applications submitted by my districts and choosing the winner to send on to the state competition. I was always so impressed with the students from my region and very proud to select one to share with the rest of the state!

Then I became a member of the committee to choose the top three state winners. I found out that all the regions in our state have brilliant and talented students! Young people who are hard-working and dedicated and very deserving of our recognition. I've had a chance to talk with some of these state winners and they are always so grateful for the monies they receive.

Please, donate to our CDI Scholarship Fund this year. If you've already sent in your district's donation, I thank you. If you still need to do so, please send it in soon. We must make sure that we are able to support these wonderful young Iowans who are the future of conservation. It is my hope, and my plan, that we will be back to our in-person auction in 2022. But for now, I'm needing every district to do its part in supporting our CDI Scholarship Program. Can I count on you?

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

We received some good advice from a private foundation program manager recently. She told us that we should strive to build S.T.A.R. into a program that sustains itself over time. To do this, we need to have enough fields in the program that agricultural processors and food companies will be willing to pay for the label. This is a very long-term process, but it is worth starting. We know that when we purchase a farm or build any business, the results are not instant or even short term. My brother and I work with a company that sells an identity preserved, branded pork. When we started, the benefits were not what we hoped but as we stayed with them, the benefits greatly increased. As the saying goes, a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. Now is the time to start the journey.

In an effort to increase communication and your knowledge of what is happening at the state level, we are going to begin emailing the monthly meeting packet for the State Soil Conservation and Water Quality Committee. We will send an email with the packet attached and we will try to remember to point out that it is not spam and that the attachment is safe to open. We plan to send the packet the week after the meeting has occurred, but it will have the minutes of the previous meeting. You also find the SSCWQC agendas and approved minutes on the IDALS website: [State Soil Conservation Water Quality Committee](#).

We have posted the [Current Membership Approved Resolutions](#) document to the CDI website for you to review. When you review this, please consider issues which you believe CDI membership should act on and propose resolutions in response to those issues. The resolution process will start next spring.

Planner Profile: Madison Conley, CDI Planner for NW Iowa

Madison Conley was a University of Iowa graduate with a degree in “Environmental Policy and Planning” and a keen interest in sustainability. Her goal: match her background with her future: “A basic rule I learned when searching for jobs is to make sure my values correlate closely with the company or organization that I’d be working for,” says Madison. “So, when I read CDI’s mission statement, I found it encompassed my beliefs and the values that I would want to work toward achieving. I’ve always believed that small changes can lead to bigger impacts. CDI’s mission is on the right track to make positive changes in the environmental world.”



Madison Conley, NW Planner

Madison joined the “Five-Year Planners” team at CDI, responsible for helping lead 24 districts in Northwest Iowa through the Iowa code-mandated updating of their 5-year “Soil and Water Resource Conservation Plan (SWRCP)” Those first months working to learn a process while simultaneously executing was a challenge she met, with gratitude for those initial SWCDs. “I’m thankful for the first couple districts that I worked with. Not only for their patience, but for their flexibility. I was able to gather their feedback which helped me learn how to better my process”. In her year as CDI Planner, Madison says she is “over the moon with how I fit into this world”, as both facilitator and district planning partner. “Working alongside people to help achieve common goals in conservation is something that I’ve always wanted to do. Being a Northwest planner, I get the opportunity to utilize my skills and knowledge to facilitate a variety of situations. The most important skill is good communication, which allows for positive change in communities and districts.”

A native of South Elgin, IL, and based in Johnson County, Madison operates mostly on the Zoom platform, offering the most feasible way to make good progress across so much territory. “I’ve had great success – as well as our other planners – over Zoom. I want to make this process as easy, efficient, and smooth as I can for the SWCDs that I work with. I know there’s a lot of work that districts commissioners and staff have on their plate. This doesn’t need to be a huge project that falls on SWCD commissioners and staff.” Instead, Madison says districts can rely on her to help facilitate and bring a positive approach to help get their 5-Year SWRCP completed. “This five-year plan gives commissioners and staff a great base for the next couple years. They can refer back to those goals that we developed through the planning process to try to achieve their overall mission as an SWCD.”

The promise of PGC: ‘perennial groundcover’ Black Hawk SWCD/NRCS partnership lands major CIG grant

Black Hawk SWCD recently earned a matching “Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG)” from NRCS in the 2021 Iowa CIG competition with their proposal: “Perennial Groundcover: A Scalable Systems Approach to Achieving Soil & Water Conservation with High-Yield, Row Crop Production in Iowa”. The grant will help finance ten five-acre trials in northeast Iowa to be established with perennial groundcover (PGC) in a five-year project.

According to the grant application, the potential of groundcover to conserve soil resources is long recognized, but cover crops to date only account for 4% of working landscape in the U.S.: “What is needed is year-round cover that is compatible with dominant crops and cropping systems, doesn’t significantly increase production cost or reduce yield, and is attractive to producers.” Such a year-round cover must work constructively with farmers, be scalable, and present cost-effective conservation solutions that do not require additional time and other resources. The CIG grant provides \$100,000 in federal financial assistance funds, with cash and in-kind matching partner contributions of just under \$238,000.

Black Hawk SWCD Chair and CDI V.P. Jeri Thornsberry credits the partnership between Black Hawk SWCD and NRCS for making the grant application a success. “When partners stand shoulder to shoulder as they work towards the same goal, magic happens,” says Thornsberry. “This CIG is an example of that magic, and now we are excited and ready to get started. Conservation wins when we focus on a common goal.” Thornsberry and NRCS District Conservationist Shaffer Ridgeway worked tirelessly together to pull all the needed information for this grant. Cyndi Bartel from Iowa State University provided the technical expertise and Jenna Curran, IDALS CA, submitted the grant components electronically days before the due date. Project collaborators include Iowa State University, Corteva Agriscience, and Go Seed, Inc.



Corn growing in PGC is planted in alternating 15"-wide strip-tilled rows on 30" centers. (Illustration courtesy Black Hawk SWCD and NRCS)



Profile of corn growing in PGC (Photo courtesy Black Hawk SWCD and NRC)

The three principal objectives of the CIG grant: 1) Quantify annual row crop production in perennial groundcover and perennial groundcover establishment; 2) Quantify the benefits of perennial groundcovers to improve physical, chemical and biological components of soil health; and 3) Outreach to Historically Underserved communities.

“Planting a perennial cover crop means that a living root is in the ground 365 days a year,” says Ridgeway. “Talk about taking a big step to improve water quality and build soil health!”

According to Ridgeway, Black Hawk County is a state leader in ground cover – and the CIG grant could significantly help expand usage for producers. “Black Hawk County has made great progress in getting cover crops planted in over 20% of our field – well above the state average,” he says. “And yet farmers grumble each year that they just do not have time to plant cover crops in the fall and then terminate them in the spring, especially when the weather is not cooperating. Introducing perennial cover crops gives farmers an alternative – the option of ‘one and done.’”

First step: Training our conservation professionals

Mastering the benefits of oxbow restoration

By **Kriss Nelson**

Iowa Soybean Association, staff writer

There are several opportunities to add oxbows to Iowa's landscape, but the first step is learning how to do so. The Iowa Soybean Association, along with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Conservation, The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship and The Nature Conservancy recently joined forces on an oxbow restoration training. The two-day training, which was geared toward conservation professionals, included a virtual and an in-person event.

The purpose of the training was to help educate conservation experts about oxbow restoration and to further dive into the details of the recently developed Oxbow Toolkit. The Oxbow Toolkit is a step-by-step guide for restoring oxbow wetlands. It's available at no cost, and can be downloaded [through this site](#). "It was very successful," said Darrick Weissenfluh, fish and wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who was one of the presenters. "The questions and engagement we had were exceptional."

The day one virtual training video reached 82 participants from across Iowa. The in-person training allowed for 42 conservation professionals, representing 17 different organizations/counties.

"People from across the state embarked to the training, it was a great time of year to get together with conservation folks to walk through how to restore these oxbows," said Brandon Iddings, Iowa Soybean Association field services program manager for conservation resources. "At the Iowa Soybean Association, we work for the farmer. I always try to bring the farmer aspect into the oxbows, and I tried to bring that into these trainings. Oxbows are good for water quality; they are a good edge-of-field practice."

What's an oxbow?

Oxbows — the winding, meandering, disconnected pools — are a common sight across the Iowa landscape. Over time, the calmer waterways become filled with sediment carried in from the mainstream. Restoring oxbows can offer a wide range of benefits, from the ecological such as providing an ecosystem for endangered wildlife; to the preventative, as oxbows can help remove nitrates before heading for a waterway. "The idea was to help scale up the adoption of oxbow restoration and to help conservation professionals feel comfortable and confident in doing restorations on their own so we can get this practice to scale in order to see some measurable changes across the landscape," says Karen Wilke, Iowa Freshwater Specialist and Boone River Project Director for The Nature Conservancy, presenter and one of the organizers of the event. [Click here to read the full report](#) and more details, including helpful links about oxbow restoration.



In-person oxbow training (Photo courtesy Iowa Soybean Association)

This article was provided by the Iowa Soybean Association's Research Center for Farming Innovation (RCFI). Our mission is to engage Iowa farmers through research and innovation to increase their productivity, profitability, and sustainability. For more information on the Iowa Soybean Association's Research Center for Farming Innovation, visit our website www.iasoybeans.com/Research or contact Kristen Dearden, kdearden@iasoybeans.com. Iowa Soybean Association is a valued sponsor of CDI.



Research Center for Farming Innovation

Poweshiek County Soil and Water Conservation District co-hosting

NRCS staff promote soil health, programs at ILF Field Day

Iowa Learning Farms, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, and Poweshiek County Soil and Water Conservation District hosted a cover crop field day on Tuesday, Sept. 14, at Roger Van Donselaar’s Farm in Grinnell. Cover crops continue to grow in popularity in Iowa due to their many benefits, including reduced soil erosion, weed suppression potential, reduced nitrogen and phosphorus loads entering water bodies, and increased soil organic matter. Cover crops and no-tillage work together to help increase water infiltration and reduce erosion during heavy rain events. The field day provided attendees best management practice information to maintain yields during the transition to a higher residue system of no-tillage and cover crops.



The workshop began with a panel discussion with host farmer Roger Van Donselaar and Mike Phillips, a fellow Poweshiek County farmer. Roger has been using no-till on his corn and soybean farm for nearly 30 years and added cover crops to the system six

years ago to help with reducing herbicide usage and control erosion. As Roger states, “Cover crops do the tillage for you!”



NRCS Soil Conservationist Jack Little (Malcom) shows some local farmers the difference between no-till/cover crop managed soil and conventionally tilled soil during the cover crops field day in Grinnell on Sept. 14.

Rebecca Vittetoe, Iowa State Extension Agronomist, provided cover crop species and seeding best management practice information and shared tips for those considering grazing cover crops. Beth Brand, NRCS District Conservationist in Poweshiek County shared county updates and program opportunities.

Iowa Learning Farms field days and workshops are supported by the USDA-NRCS. Established in 2004, Iowa Learning Farms is building a Culture of Conservation by encouraging adoption of conservation practices. Farmers, researchers and ILF team members are

working together to identify and implement the best management practices that improve water quality and soil health while remaining profitable. For more information about Iowa Learning Farms, visit

www.iowalearningfarms.org.

This article is authored by Jason Johnson, State Public Affairs Specialist with NRCS, and is reprinted from the USDA NRCS [Iowa Current Developments Fall 2021 newsletter](#). If you are curious to learn more about conservation practices and the *Saving Today’s Agricultural Resources (STAR)* program, please visit the [CDI S.T.A.R. webpage](#) for more information and to sign up.