

---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

March has been a busy month with all of the regional meetings. It was so good to have been able to meet with our commissioners and our partners in person. A huge thank you to all of the hosting districts. Your meetings were very organized and the food was delicious.

We at CDI learned a lot as we travelled across the state this month. We are grateful that you shared your thoughts and concerns with us. I continue to be available to chat with you by phone (712-261-3531) or, if at all possible, in person.

CDI Board members will be very busy this coming month as work on the poster contest, scholarships and the Envirothon continues. We appreciate the efforts of the commissioners who work hard at the local level to promote these wonderful programs.

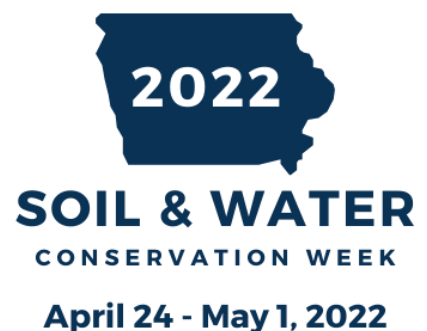
At my local SWCD meeting this morning, we began making plans for our annual summer tour. After two years of not being able to hold it, we are very excited about this year's plans. If your district is planning a tour or a field-days type of event, be sure to invite your CDI regional director or any of us on the executive board. We'd love the chance to see you!

Ramona

Iowa SWCDs making plans for [2022 Iowa Soil & Water Conservation Week!](#)

How is your district planning to celebrate Iowa Soil & Water Conservation? [Here are some starter ideas:](#)

- [Feature SWCD commissioners in publications/interviews](#)
- Have District promote IFELA winners – radio interviews/podcasts.
- Encourage the PCs/staff to do an interview on the radio or submit news release
- Highlight a Watershed project or success story that emphasizes soil health practices
- Have districts encourage FFA groups to do an activity
- Organize a field day or two
- Social media posts
- Organize a local stream clean-up event



Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

It was great to see many of you at the spring regional meetings in March. I know that we are still cautious of Covid and after having experienced the illness myself, I understand why. Given that, attendance was fewer than we hoped for. Since we did not see you at spring regional meetings, we would ask that you go to the CDI website, cdiowa.org and check out the STAR program. At spring regional meetings, we learned that our website relating to STAR field forms was not working properly. Farmers who participated in the program should have received an email to let them know what their STAR rating was, but they did not. We are working with our website designer to correct this but would ask that you fill out the field form for 2022 (after planting) and let us know if you receive your STAR rating in a return email. The process should occur automatically. Please email Carlee Sabus at: carlee@cdiowa.org with any questions or comments on the system.

Last month, we let you know that the McKnight Foundation awarded CDI a grant to begin a regenerative farming mentor program. Now, we are looking for a few good regenerative farming commissioners who would be willing to serve as mentors (*more information below*). The grant provides a stipend for up to 10 commissioners to serve as mentors. We realize that finding the mentees will be the difficult part and will work with the mentors and our partners to help with that process. The mentor-commissioners will be asked to offer advice and helpful tips about cover crop management, no-till management, nutrient management, and other practices used in regenerative farming. This idea came from commissioners who have faced learning on their own and if we can help others through that process, we will increase conservation and improve water quality in Iowa. If you are interested in becoming a mentor, please email me: john@cdiowa.org

CDI Mentors: Peer support lets commissioners be catalysts for change

Regenerative agriculture promotes reduced costs and environmental impacts, making it a highly relevant and important alternative to many traditional agriculture practices. Combining this practice with peer-to-peer learning statewide acknowledges local differences in land, enhances producer connections, encourages shared learning, and empowers participants to work together to drive the direction and goals of improving soil quality. That's the objective behind a new "Mentor/Mentee" program introduced this spring by CDI. CDI seeks 10 SWCD commissioners active in regenerative ag practices to – in the words of CDI Executive Director John Whitaker – "Be the shoulder to lean on, and bring the knowledge base when those questions come up: 'This is what I've got, what do I need to do?' We want the mentor to answer the 'next steps' questions, and be ready with answers when the farmers say, 'I want to make this work, but I'm concerned it's not going to – how can I make this work?'"

Whitaker says each of the 10 mentors would have 10 mentees. "The mentees could be someone we recommend or someone else recommends, in touch with a mentor who knows how to do cover crops, no-till and regenerative farming practices. We'd expect contact to be more a phone conference; if the mentor wants to visit the farm, that's up to them — we'd leave it up to the mentor how to connect." Mentors should be commissioners, who would receive a stipend for their time sharing their knowledge with mentees. "We just need someone there for reassurance, for the 'I had this happen, now what?' moments." Interested commissioners should contact Whitaker directly at john@cdiowa.org. A successful mentoring program could encourage support through local networking and attract buy-in from other landholders.



On-location meetings were held in eight of nine CDI Regions this month. “I feel that the sharing of ideas can happen so much better in person,” said CDI President Ramona Nitz. “So I’m very happy that these meetings took place. We had some great discussions!” Pictured presenting at the Region 6 meeting north of Madrid, clockwise from the top: NRCS State Conservationist Jon Hubbert; CDI President Ramona Nitz; and Soil Conservation & Water Quality Division Director Susan Kozak.



Spring Regional meetings bring focus to common goals for 2022

In another sign of returning to normal, statewide Spring Regional meetings were successfully held across Iowa featuring presentations from CDI, IDALS, NRCS and Region leadership – sharing updates, news, financial reports and prospects for future progress. Eight of nine CDI Regions were able to meet in-person, with Region 5 meeting virtually. CDI Executive Director John Whitaker thanked those who took time to participate: “With everything that commissioners have been through and done to keep conservation moving during the pandemic, it was certainly good to hear from them in person again.” The Region 5 virtual meeting is available for playback for those who were unable to attend their local gathering: click [Region 5 Spring Regional meeting](#), and type in (not copy-paste) the password: **uj@695!\$**

Claire Carlson ... “The Recycling Lady”!

CDI Planner takes passion for conservation into the classroom

Ask Claire Carlson for a “fun fact” and she won’t disappoint: “When I was in 6th grade, I dressed up like a *recycling bin* for Halloween!” Young Claire was prescient. By day – and many nights – CDI Planner Claire Carlson diligently helps Northeast Iowa SWCDs as they develop their 5-year “Soil and Water Resource Conservation Plan”. But for one hour, one day a month, to an impressionable room of second graders, Claire is “The Recycling Lady”!

“I didn’t grow up with recycling,” says Claire. “I grew up in the country, and we did not have that available. So, I would take my swim bag filled with plastic bottles to school or to the ‘Y’ to recycle there. That was just me figuring this stuff out. We never really had much education around it – which is one driving factor for me wanting to give more of these lessons in schools: there’s a lack of this kind of education.”

Inspiration to take her experience and knowledge about conservation issues to the classroom arose from a long history of similar work in college and professional work, and a timely comment made through her work with CDI. “During a Blackhawk five-year-planning public meeting, someone from Midwest Environmental Education Conference said, ‘We are having a conference here in the summer for people doing environmental education and teaching in the classroom.’ So I spoke at that conference this past summer in Decorah. It was the motivating factor to get the lessons into the school.”



CDI NE Planner Claire Carlson



Claire Carlson leads class of Ottumwa 2nd-graders through fun “Earth Day” awareness projects.

Claire knew she had convenient access to a classroom – her mother, Lynette Carlson, teaches second grade at Liberty Elementary in Ottumwa. As “The Recycling Lady” (though kids call her by name), Claire begins with a brief overview of the “Three R’s”- Reduce consumption, Reuse, and Recycle. “I like getting kids actively involved by physically holding recyclables, placing items in specific categories like ‘Can this be recycled? Or is this something that gets thrown away?’. In one of my lessons, we start with newspaper cutouts and a sheet of paper with two columns: ‘Trash’ and ‘Recycle’. Then, in a later lesson, we’ll look at real items to sort.”

The once-a-month lessons continue with topics like plastic pollution in the ocean, deforestation, sustainability, Earth Day – why Earth Day is important, and what students for their part can do on Earth Day. “An upcoming lesson is focused on what I do for CDI and on-the-ground conservation work I’ve done in the past, in other internships and jobs. Even if they don’t remember it right now, at least they are exposed to the idea that there are opportunities for us all to do this kind of work. We want to emphasize that the things we have are abstracted from nature, and it’s important to pay attention to these things, and remain aware about how we treat nature.”

The young learners at Liberty Elementary come to recognize the link between practices learned in the class and what they may see at home and in the community. “Obviously as seven- and eight-year-olds they can only do so much, but it’s good to get that initial exposure. At times, I’ll hear from one of the kids, ‘I picked up trash this weekend with my family’, or ‘We recycled this at home!’ I hope they’re learning something. Growing up, living

in the country, not having a whole lot of information about this, but still somehow finding this world of recycling, sustainability, environmental protection, etc., it made an impact me.” Her hope is to pass along that passion to the kids. “Even if it’s just to plant that one seed with that one kid to inspire them to grow into someone that’s also caring about this topic – we really need more people caring about the planet and doing things in service to it, instead of just service to themselves.” If a young trick-or-treater ever knocks on the door dressed as a recycle bin – thank the Claire Carlsons of the world for getting the message out!

Working our way back to normalcy: 2019 ... 2020 ... 2021 ... **2022!**

Iowa Envirothon returns to on-location competition

For the first time since 2019, high-school-age teams from across Iowa gathered in *real rooms* (not virtual!) for face-to-face meetings of minds to test their sustainability savvy. The Iowa Envirothon® Regional competition returned to four locations in March, with forty-one teams in competition. CDI Program Manager Carlee Sabus says the chance to watch teams once again in action, working together as they made their way through the four topical tests, was worth the wait. “We’re glad to have a normal state competition this year,” says Sabus. “Definitely a bit of a dip in involvement, with Covid still affecting teachers. We reached out to as many people as we could, and we know there’s a lot of districts, as well, that personally reached out to get teachers signed up, and we appreciate that. We hosted four Regional competitions, instead of the usual five.” Events were held in Waterloo, Cherokee, Iowa City and Ankeny. Red Oak was cancelled due to low team attendance.



Muscatine Gold	77
Decorah Nerd Republic*	73
Carnivorous Chickens*	73
Red Admirals (Marshalltown High)	70
Skabush*	70
MMCRU	70
Louisa-Muscatine	69
Bellevue Blue	68
North Scott	68
Sioux Center	66
Algona	63
Langjer*	61
Cooks Critters*	59
Sioux Central	59
Charles City	58

*Top 15 Envirothon teams moving on to state competition. (*Teams representing Decorah)*

The teams faced four test subjects, 25 questions each – soil, aquatics, forestry, and wildlife. “The CDI Envirothon Committee developed the tests. We found local experts on the subjects to help write the tests and we posted a study guide on the [CDI website Envirothon page](#). All the information our test writers used was included in the study guide.” Of the forty-one teams that

participated, the Top 15 best cumulative scores – correct answers out of 100 questions – move on to the state finals, scheduled for May 2nd at Jester Park Nature Center in Granger. The state contest will challenge teams with the same four topics as Regionals, plus a fifth test covering current environmental issues. “And then each team will do a ten-to-fifteen-minute oral presentation. We have a scenario written that is based on the National Competition theme ‘Waste to Resources’ that we send out to those teams, and they can choose how to do their presentation. We don’t limit digital use.”

Volunteers needed for state Envirothon!
If interested in volunteering for the state contest on May 2nd in Granger, please contact Carlee Sabus at carlee@cdiowa.org.

In a release announcing the 15 top teams advancing to the state competition, Sabus wrote: “...I would like to give a *huge* thank you to all of our coordinators and volunteers, we would not be able to hold these great events without all of their time, dedication, and hard work, so sincerely, *Thank You* from the CDI staff. We truly appreciate everything you all do to make this event successful, and more importantly, fun!”