

---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

The past Memorial Day weekend brings the unofficial start of Summer. We've had a bit of rain up here in NW Iowa this week so folks are smiling from ear to ear and are hopeful that the rain will continue throughout these next few months. We sure don't want a repeat of last year!

To me, the coming of summer brings to mind the start of our county fairs. Does your district participate in your county fair by putting up a display or manning a booth? I sure wish I could get to your county fairs to see what you all do to spread our message of conservation. Send photos to CDI so we can see what you do!

Speaking of fairs, remember that we now hold our CDI annual conference right after the last weekend of the Iowa State Fair in case any of our commissioners want to make just one trip to central Iowa to attend the Fair in Des Moines and the annual conference in Ames. Be on the lookout soon for more information about the conference. I've been hard at work with various committees to make sure that this year's conference is one of the best we've ever offered! Come, see what we have planned for you!

You won't be hearing from me next month as I will be out of the country for a few weeks. Call Jeri or John if you need anything. Jeri will be presiding over the June CDI Board meeting. If there's anything you'd like the Board to discuss, please call your regional director. Your director would be very happy to hear from you.

— Ramona

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

The resolutions have been sent to the CAs for distribution to the commissioners. We wanted to give you a little more time this year so that you should be able to have a couple of meetings to discuss the individual resolutions and complete your pre-conference voting. Also, we will be sending the proposed bylaws changes within the next few weeks so that you can study those prior to the annual conference. Please be sure to mark your calendars for the in-person Annual Conference to be held at the Gateway Center in Ames on August 22 and 23. We will have the business meeting on Monday morning the 22nd. We did not fill either of the Private Lands Wildlife positions we have open. We chose five applicants to interview, three of whom accepted other positions before the interviews and received turn-down from one who we offered a position to. We have readvertised and will just interview as we receive applicants and fill as soon as we can.

CDI has submitted a USDA 'Partnerships in Climate-Smart Commodities' grant application. If funded the grant would make staff available to meet one-on-one with producers to promote climate-smart farming practices. This will be a significant workload for us but will give all the SWCDs increased visibility.

Iowa DNR County Creek Sign Grant Program announced

Conservation and natural resource groups interested in building awareness of Iowa's creeks and watersheds can now apply for grants to put up signage. The Iowa DNR's Water Quality Improvement program is now accepting applications through July 15 for its new "County Creek Sign Grant Program." The grant will provide between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per county to install creek signs and watershed signs on county roads or city streets within priority watersheds.

The general purpose of the grant is to enhance awareness of creeks and watersheds in Iowa, especially where watershed projects are underway to improve water quality. Eligible applicants include: Iowa County Conservation Boards, Watershed Management Authorities, Resource Conservation and Development agencies, or Soil and Water Conservation Districts, or counties (including county engineering departments).

The grant will be funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Section 319 funds awarded by Iowa DNR. Application materials are available on DNR's watershed improvement webpage. For more information, contact Steve Hopkins, Nonpoint Source Coordinator, Iowa DNR Water Quality Improvement Section, at Stephen.hopkins@dnr.iowa.gov or at 515-505-0140. Or contact Steve Konrady, Western Iowa Basin Coordinator, Water Quality Improvement Section, at 515-204-1456 or Steven.Konrady@dnr.iowa.gov.

Most farmers are climate skeptics. But it turns out improving their soil also fights climate change

Dana Cronin, Harvest Public Media

This story was produced in partnership with the Food & Environment Reporting Network. It comes from the new podcast [Hot Farm](#). Lightly edited for space. To read the complete article and hear an audio version, [click here](#).



Climate change is not a big concern for Lin Warfel. Sure, he's noticed the increasing rainfall over the 60 odd years he's been farming corn and soybeans in central Illinois — especially when ponds form in his soybean fields. But he's pretty sure there's nothing he can do about it. And yet, over the past few years, Warfel has gradually started incorporating climate-change fighting techniques on his farm. He plants cover crops on some of his land in the wintertime, which sequester carbon from the atmosphere. He's stopped tilling, or plowing, his soil as much, which helps keep carbon in the ground. To implement this new style of farming, Warfel had help from a program called **S.T.A.R. — Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources**. STAR encourages farmers to implement sustainable practices on their farms, and in the process, is making farms across the Midwest more climate friendly. And yet, the words "climate change" are nowhere to be found in the program's objectives.

"We don't use the words climate change," said Steve Stierwalt, an Illinois-based farmer and co-founder of STAR. "In the agricultural community that becomes a political term." Rather, the program draws on another environmental issue that is much more front of mind for farmers: soil erosion. Unlike climate change, soil erosion is a huge concern for Illinois farmer Lin Warfel. He's the fourth generation to farm the land his great-grandparents bought in the mid-1800s. And throughout his lifetime, he's watched a lot of soil disappear. "All of a sudden, a whole bunch of the soil would be gone. There would be a ravine there ... where I used to have soil," he said. Midwestern farmers have lost about one-third of their topsoil since Europeans first settled in the region.



*Illinois farmer Lin Warfel stands on his five-star rated field.
(Photo: Dana Cronin)*

That's largely due to an overall decline in soil health caused by conventional farming methods. Heavy tilling, which involves stirring up the soil in order to prepare it for planting, also loosens it up, priming it for erosion. Soil is also often left bare in between harvest and planting seasons, which leaves it vulnerable to erosion. Erosion is also exacerbated by intensifying wind and rainstorms caused by climate change. It's an urgent issue for farmers, and some — like the founders of STAR — are mobilizing to fight it. "Soil is a finite resource, you know, and we've already lost half our organic matter here in east central Illinois," said Joe Rothermel, farmer and co-founder of STAR. Rothermel and Stierwalt are on the board of their local Soil and Water Conservation District. Around 2017, STAR was born out of conversations between the two on how to better conserve soil in their district. They decided to start a program in which farmers submit their conservation practices and get rated — between 1-5 stars — for how well they're doing at preserving soil. The agriculture industry accounts for 10% of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. In order to reduce those emissions, conventional agriculture will have to transform. STAR is making that happen. The program encourages a less conventional style of farming, which is necessary to fight soil erosion. And, serendipitously, almost every soil health practice the STAR program encourages also helps to fight climate change. Farmer Lin Warfel's winter cover crop, for example, sequesters carbon *and* stabilizes his soil with its root system. His lack of tillage keeps carbon in the ground *and* makes his soil hardier and less likely to runoff in a rain or windstorm. He doesn't use STAR practices in all of his fields. But the ones that do incorporate STAR practices have a five-star rating. "We've been hoping for something like this for a long time," said Paige Buck with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service in Illinois. Buck says the USDA has been glad to see the STAR program spread throughout Illinois and into three other states, including Iowa, Indiana and Colorado. She says what's made it so popular is that it's farmer-led and farmer-trusted. "Sometimes getting advice from the government or from getting it online, sometimes that's not what a farmer needs," she said. "What they need to do is they need to hear from another farmer." If we hope to stave off the worst effects of climate change, Buck said more programs like this are needed.

26th Annual 'Children's Water Festival'

CDI displays current conservation art with sea of Iowa 5th graders

They came. Wave after wave. Hundreds of Iowa 5th graders entering and exiting the Exhibit Hall on the DMACC campus in Ankeny to experiment, experience and be entertained by dozens of displays focusing on the most important thing in life: *water*. The Exhibit Hall displays were just one stop during the campus-wide, day-long "Children's Water Festival", held May 12th. According to Jackie Gautsch, natural resource biologist with the Iowa DNR and a member of the festival organizing team, this year's annual festival hosted approximately 1,500 students from seventy-five 5th-grade classes, representing twenty schools, arriving from all corners of the state.

"It's a day of educational fun!" Gautsch says. "It's free, and an opportunity to learn about the importance of water. The students experience presentations, hands-on activities, exhibits, games, and other entertainment." From learning about freshwater fish and turtle life (for many students, a first) and freshwater mussels – "One of the most endangered organisms on the planet," says Gautsch – to learning the chemical and physical properties of water from the Iowa Science Center or meeting live, unusual water critters from the Blank Park Zoo, there was plenty of quality knowledge to soak up. CDI joined other displays as an exhibit hall participant, featuring artwork from recent "CDI Poster Contest" winners. Festival sponsors and organizers included the City of Ames, DMACC, Iowa DNR, USDA, City of Huxley, Iowa Association of Municipal Utilities, and Iowa Rural Water Association. "We're planning on doing it next year," says Gautsch. A date is pending. "If people are interested in volunteering or being in our exhibit hall, or being a presenter, we're always looking for people who want to come out and have some fun for the day!" For more information, see: [Children's Water Festival](#).



Jill Soenen and son Logan, from Norwalk, give close inspection of youthful art at the CDI Poster Contest display. More than 1500 students attended the daylong "Children's Water Festival", including tours of the exhibit hall (below).



Algona FFA earns top honors in 2022 "Iowa Envirothon" state contest



State Envirothon 2022 champions Algona FFA, with former CDI President Dennis Carney (far left) and CDI President Ramona Nitz (far right)

Fifteen teams gathered at the Jester Park Nature Center in Granger on May 2nd for the final round of the Iowa Envirothon, in what would be a very tight competition. The state contest challenged teams with the same four topics as Regionals – Aquatics, Forestry, Soils, Wildlife – plus a fifth test covering current environmental issues. Additionally, each team presented a ten-to-fifteen-minute oral presentation, with the theme 'Waste to Resources'. At day's end Algona FFA earned first place with 393 overall points; the margin of victory for the next three finalists were razor thin: Marshalltown 2nd place 374 points, Skabush (Decorah) 373.33 points; and Muscatine FFA Gold 373 points. Congratulations to all – winners every one! National competition is scheduled for July 24-30, at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

“Women, Land & Legacy” chapter works to help Winneshiek SWCD meet priority goal for five-year SWRCP



It doesn't take long for Sophia Campbell to take note of a trend. “When I started working as a watershed coordinator in 2020, doing a lot of my day-to-day producer visits or meeting with growers – all of them were men,” says Campbell. “I had one woman in the first year I was a watershed



Megan Giorgenti



Sophia Campbell

coordinator come to the counter herself and ask about cover crops. And I was really surprised – there's got to be more of you out there!” Campbell says that even though more than 50% of Iowa farmland is owned by women, “That's not who I see walk through the door at our USDA center asking about our conservation programs and cost-share opportunities. I wanted to find out where that disconnection was.” Two years later, with support and help from the Winneshiek SWCD, Campbell and colleagues work to ease that gender disconnection on the farm with the official rebirth of a “Women, Land & Legacy” chapter in Winneshiek County – joining a growing list of counties bringing education and outreach programs to local women through this USDA-sponsored program.

As Yellow River Headwaters Project Coordinator for Winneshiek SWCD, Campbell and the district commission made a focus on outreach to women part of her official responsibilities. “In Iowa we already know that it's an issue, that we don't do enough for women getting involved in these contracts, getting CSP and EQIP contracts obligated to that group. I personally wanted to get in touch with more women. I was seeing that we didn't have enough women coming through the door. So, as we were making our five-year plan, a big part of that was to get more in touch with our absentee landowners and women landowners.”

The Winneshiek SWCD 5-year “Soil and Water Resource Conservation Plan” includes this priority goal: *Educate women, senior, and absentee landowners in Winneshiek County of their property rights and responsibilities to both encourage and promote conservation practices.* Brainstorming with DNR colleague Megan Giorgenti, a watershed coordinator in northeast Iowa, and consulting with [Iowa Women, Land & Legacy \(WLL\)](#) coordinator Tanya Meyer-Dideriksen, the team determined that starting an active WLL chapter in Winneshiek County could be one valuable way to help meet that 5-year plan goal.

WLL is a USDA education and outreach program particular to Iowa that has impacted thousands of Iowa women in agriculture. “Any county can form a chapter,” says Campbell. “They're usually formed by local people that work in conservation. You don't have to be an NRCS or USDA employee to start a chapter, but it does help to get some of your women landowners from your county and some of your local conservation partners like FSA, USDA and ISU involved in getting going. It helps to have a lot of voices in the room to create your team.” Once that team is in place, “listening sessions” are scheduled to hear local concerns from women with agriculture and conservation questions and concerns.



Winneshiek WLL listening session held in March

“Our county hosted two listening sessions in March,” says Campbell. “Our district has been really helpful and supportive of us in starting the WLL chapter, and they gave us a donation to help us pay some costs for this listening session in March. We heard conservation issues that local women in agriculture want research on or need more help with – ways they can work that into the management of their farm, work it into their leases where they are addressing conservation issues on their farm or on their property. From those listening sessions, we got a list of topics our local women most want to hear about, and the most interested topic was land leases. Another big topic was estate planning and land succession.” The WLL team takes what was heard in the listening sessions and return to respond with information in learning sessions, the first learning session scheduled for June. “All we have to do is get our local women to show up and maybe that can give them the information they need to kick start their own estate and transition plan for their property.” This could be the start of a promising new trend in Winneshiek county.

Tama SWCD Stewardship Week tree seedling distribution Planting the seeds to grow future conservationists



As part of the Tama SWCD Stewardship Week, white pine seedlings were distributed to 288 sixth graders in six school districts, celebrating the 150th Anniversary of Arbor Day, April 29th. Schools pictured include (*clockwise from top left*) North Tama, South Tama, Green Mountain-Garwin, Union CSD (with Tama SWCD Commissioner Jan Wobeter, center), and Gladbook-Reinbeck. Seedlings were also distributed at Meskwaki Elementary.

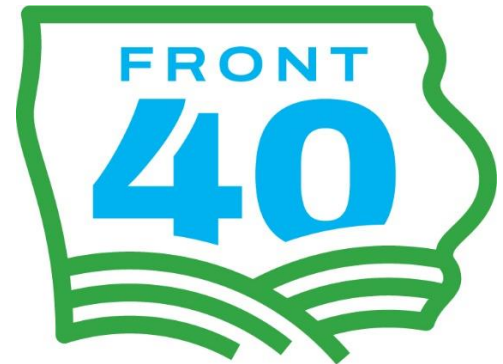


Cultivating Conservation Champions – Round 2

A better future grows from Iowa's Front 40

By: Joseph Hopper, Iowa Soybean Association

Who is working to ensure a better, brighter future? Iowa's Front 40 launched in December of 2021, highlighting 40 champions from across the state who are at the forefront of sustainable soil and water management practices. Created by the Iowa Soybean Association (ISA) Research Center for Farming Innovation (RCFI) and supported by the Walton Family Foundation, the movement began in 2021 with a series of eight Grassroots Leadership Forums, with ISA staff gathering around the table with Iowa farmers.



Save-the-Date for 2022 Grassroots Leadership Forums

June 23 – Southeast Iowa

July 7 – Southwest Iowa

July 14 – Northwest Iowa

July 26 – South-Central Iowa

August 9 – North-Central Iowa

August 23 – Northeast Iowa

Roger Wolf, ISA RCFI Director, says the Front 40 is a way to elevate the voices of farmers locally and learn about Iowa's soil and water conservation success stories which are already underway — while opening dialogue among all Iowans about conservation. Wolf says when farmers make changes to their operations to improve the health of the soil, it comes with real work and a real cost. "We advocate for a shared investment, both public and private, that's what it's going to take if we're going to realize the big goals the state has for improved water quality and the long-term health of the soil," Wolf says. "RCFI is going to continue to invest in these kinds of programs and we believe the voice of local people and the actions of local people is what makes all of this work."

That's what we're learning about as we talk to people across the state. We want to capture more of that momentum and build a better future for Iowa."

ISA RCFI worked with John Whitaker, CDI Executive Director, to help engage local soil and water commissioners as part of the Grassroot forums. SWCD's and elected commissioners have a key role in moving the state forward in the protection and improvement of our soil and water resources. Leveraging and expanding effective programs will be key to realizing the big goals Iowa has.

Continuing the Movement in 2022

ISA's Grassroots Leadership Forums & Iowa's Front 40 is growing in 2022. Front 40's sophomore year **kicks off in June and continues into August** with six Grassroots Leadership Forums. We're looking for agriculture's leaders to interact and share ways to shape and advance management practices to help farmers be both sustainable and profitable. At these meetings, our goal is to take a deep dive within Iowa's regions to:

- Leverage local leadership
- Build on the mission, vision, and members of the Front 40
- Advance the local vision and support local action

We would like to extend a personal invitation to Soil & Water Commissioners to attend an RCFI Grassroots Leadership Forum in their area. If interested in receiving an invite and details regarding the forums, please contact Kristen Dearden at kdearden@iasoybeans.com or 515-334-1482.



Research Center for Farming Innovation

Iowa Soybean Association is a valued sponsor of CDI