

---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.



September 2022
Volume 3, Number 12

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From: CDI President Ramona Nitz

What perfect weather we have had recently for driving through Iowa! I've had the chance to travel through much of the state these past ten days and, as always, I marvel at the beauty of our state. A big thank you to Page County for inviting me to join them for their annual appreciation luncheon. It was so good to chat with the commissioners and past commissioners as well as all the staff from that office. I've not been in that part of the state much so I made a few stops and found the people to be so nice and the towns to be very welcoming and pretty. It was a great day!

I received a call from my Congressman last week, asking if I would meet with him to discuss the next Farm Bill. Of course, I said yes! I've a meeting set up next week with the legislative liaison from the D.C. office of NACD, I have gotten a transcript of NACD President Michael Crowder's recent testimony before the Agriculture subcommittee that I will study and I will also look over the policies set forth by the NACD Farm Bill task force so that I'm very prepared to talk with Representative Feenstra about what we'd like to see regarding conservation. I've known him for years and am very much looking forward to visiting with him again.

As CDI President, I do represent all of the commissioners so if you have any thoughts on this, please do contact me with those before October 18. I gave you all my cell phone number at conference so feel free to use that to call or text. Or my email which is ramonanitz@icloud.com.

We are starting on beans this weekend and I'm sure many of you have started, or are about to start, harvest. This is, by far, the driest season we've had since starting farming decades ago. Our yields will be pretty dismal. But this is what we do, right? We plant, we hope for the best and we harvest what we can. I will be thinking of those of you who will be in the fields these next weeks and hoping you stay safe and healthy.

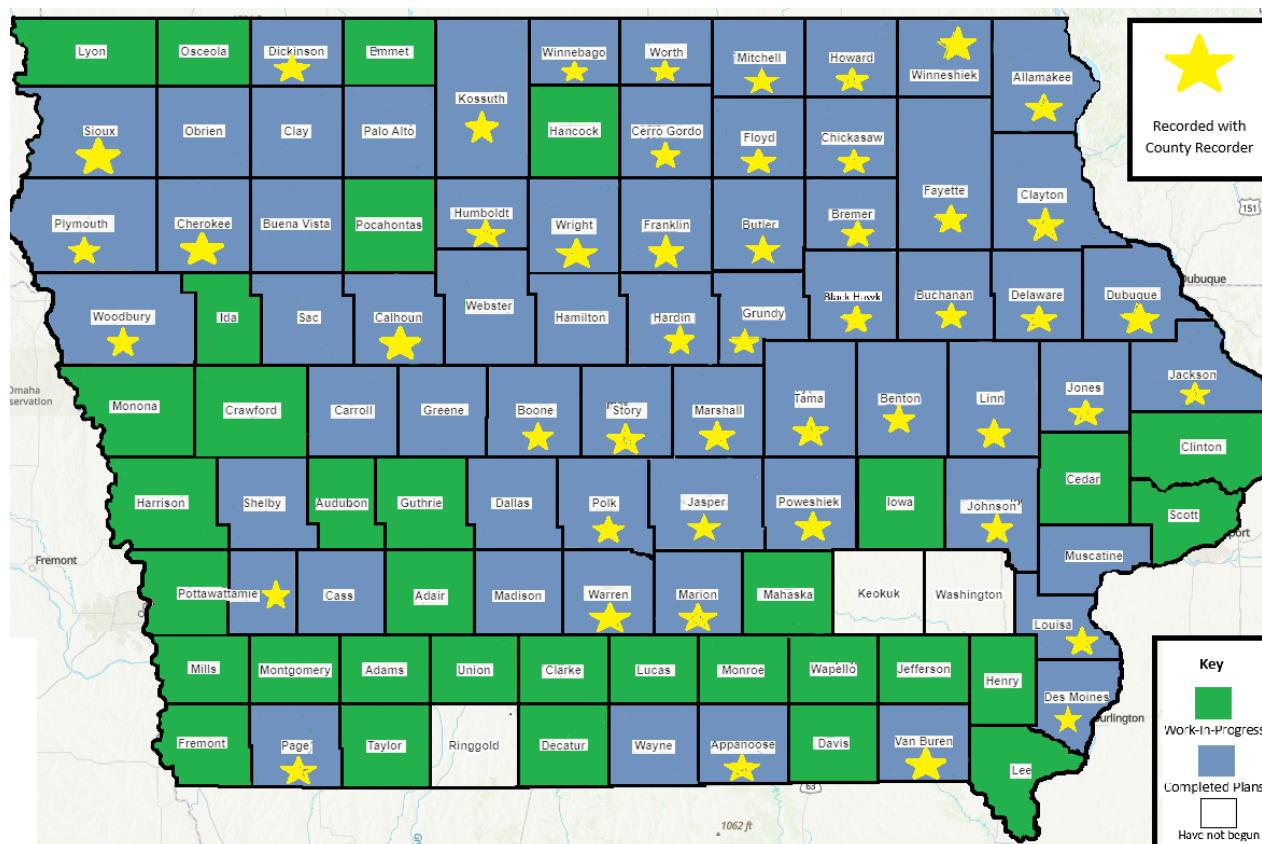
-- Ramona

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

We have received 48 annual conference surveys so far. In order to keep their responses anonymous, we print them and mix them into the file so that we do not know which district sent the responses. We are not interested in knowing who responds, only interested in improving the annual conference and having higher participation. There have been a range of good suggestions in the survey responses, and we will consider those when the committee begins to meet this winter. Please email your surveys to admin@cdiowa.org.

All of the Private Lands Wildlife positions will be filled by the second week of October when the final new staff starts. Hiring has been difficult in the past six months but seems to be improving. Two of the four Wetland Easement Team Specialists positions are filled, and we interview applicants again the first week of October. Hopefully we can fill the NW IA and NE IA positions at that time. The [2022 scholarship winners](#) are now posted to the CDI website. The poster contest winners are also posted (p. 5), and that update should be available soon.

Steady progress in statewide effort – with thanks to all SWCDs for your work! 'Five-Year SWRCP' Update



CDI 2022 Annual Conference Award Winner

Clayton SWCD recognized for long-term WQI commitment

Along the northeast corner of Iowa – Mississippi River east and sloping, rolling fields west – a multi-year effort to meet the challenge of the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy has grown from a small handful of willing producers and committed SWCD staff and commissioners into an impressive example of success meeting positive Water Quality Initiative results. For their efforts in a project officially begun in 2014, the Clayton SWCD earned top honors at the recent CDI 2022 Annual Conference award presentation.

The August conference ceremony in Ames summarized the district’s efforts: “The Demonstration of Targeted Nutrient Reduction Systems for Clayton County WQI project has shown an increased level of interest and involvement over the past eight years. Its continued growth is directly attributed to the commissioners and staff continually promoting the project’s conservation goals with area farmers and landowners.” Clayton SWCD Chairperson Mark Glawe accepted the “Exemplary Efforts Towards the Water Quality Initiative Award” presented by IDALS Division of Soil Conservation and Water Quality Director Susan Kozak.

Clayton Watershed Coordinator Eric Palas and Clayton DC Pat Schaefer have been involved in working with the district and local producers since the project’s beginning. “Back then there was only a handful of people that were using cover crops,” says Eric. “Not only through the project’s efforts but through other programs in Clayton County, the use of cover crops and other systems and practices that reduce nutrients for water resources have really taken off in Clayton County.” Eric and Pat credit local producers for program progress. “The landowner participation in these practices has been fantastic,” Eric says. “None of this would’ve happened if we wouldn’t have had landowners that were willing to put these practices in place and to talk to their neighbors about the success they’ve had with them.”



Combination no-till planting and cover crops in Clayton County. (Photos courtesy Clayton SWCD)

According to a [published overview that details their Water Quality Initiative](#), Clayton SWCD’s project “showcases a system of conservation practices tailored to produce quality waters, profitable crops and healthy soils.” The district’s award-winning success can be attributed to that word of mouth among producers, long-term district commitment to the program, critical funding from IDALS – and maybe, says Eric, simple eyeball evidence in the field. “It’s just the fact that you see something green and growing after harvest in the fall, or in March or April before planting in the spring.”



Soybeans emerge through a terminated cereal rye cover crop.

As Eric notes, the challenge for conservation in Clayton County lay in the uniqueness of the land. “Clayton County is an area that’s steep and the soils are fragile, so one conservation practice on a farm isn’t necessarily going to get you where you need to go,” he says. “It’s really a system of practices. There are several that you need to put in place to protect the land adequately. For years we had a really strong terrace and strip-cropping program, so we got all these structural practices – whether they’re terraces, waterway, or ponds – and the goal of the project was to demonstrate that if you put no-till and cover crops together with some of those structural practices you really get a system that fits the needs for the fragile slopes that we have in Clayton County.” The district received a grant from IDALS in 2020 to expand the WQI Project to include an additional watershed, adding new area to work in and more cost share dollars to promote conservation practices.

And it helps that members of the Elkader-based Clayton SWCD practice what they promote, adds Pat. “A couple of our commissioners are top-notch conservation farmers for the county. It helps when they believe in it, and we just got fortunate that we’ve got commissioners that really believe in cover crops and no-till and other soil health practices. They help do a lot of sales of the program in the county.”

Planner Profile

Golden Hills RC&D partners with CDI, brings teamwork to the Southwest



SW Planner Cara Morgan

As the four-year effort to help Iowa districts develop far-reaching Soil and Water Resource Conservation Plans (SWRCPs) continues, CDI Executive Director John Whitaker reached out to a trusted voice for conservation in Southwest Iowa, Cara Morgan, with a question: “He asked if I knew a person who could help lead that effort for CDI in the Southwest. I told him I didn’t know of ‘one’ person, ‘But would you be willing to consider a partnership with Golden Hills and you would get a ‘team’? John thought about it, got back to me and said, ‘That’s a great idea!’”

Because what’s better than a CDI Planner committed to helping districts complete their 5-year plans? Answer: having *TWO* Planners at your service! As CDI Planners for Southwest Iowa, Cara Morgan and Lance Brisbois advance the goals of their positions with Golden Hill RC&D while devoting energies to completing the work for CDI, facilitating the SWRCP process.

“We started out just figuring out where all the southwest counties are in the process,” says Lance Brisbois. “That was the first step. I’ve been really focusing on getting all the meetings done for each county – get the first brain-storming session done, get a little bit of background and start having some content to put into the plan.”

Lance and Cara share professional positions with Golden Hills RC&D, Oakland, Iowa – Lance as project coordinator, Cara as watershed coordinator and currently interim director for the non-profit group (originally a branch of NRCS, but no longer) that focuses on conservation, recreation, and cultural initiatives in rural Western Iowa.

Their dual roles are natural outcomes of their educational and professional backgrounds. Cara earned a BS degree in management and marketing, Peru State College in Nebraska; worked in management positions for mainly ag retail; and for eight years served as a county supervisor for Fremont County. “During the 2011 floods I was county supervisor and really got experience with flooding and flood resiliency,” says Cara. She and husband Brandon have three children. A Harrison County native, Lance went first to University of Minnesota, earning a degree in Urban Studies, then a Master’s Degree in Public Administration from University of Nebraska Omaha. He started with Golden Hills during grad school, in 2014.



SW Planner Lance Brisbois

“Lance has really led this effort,” says Cara. “He has really stepped up and done an awesome job. Finding out where each of our districts were in the process was a little bit of a challenge, and he really took charge of that. And we tag team as needed.”

As planners, Cara and Morgan notice challenges both similar and disparate across district borders. “We’re seeing a lot of the same issues coming up. We’re going all the way from the Missouri River to I-35,” Lance says. “There have been a few very specific things to some counties, but there’s a lot of trends that we’re noticing. One thing that keeps coming up quite a bit is absentee landowners. They may not be as engaged and may not know the land as well as someone who lives on it.”

Common issues can mean common responses for districts to include as goals and strategies for SWRCP planning, says Cara. “A lot of it is coming back to education. How can you get absentee landowners engaged? Educate them!” Cara adds other issues – cover crops, the effects of upland producers on water quality and flooding, and the urban-rural connection – are significant themes districts currently face. “We’ve actually had urban input, and I think that’s really worth discussing between urban and rural – having some of the same interests and really not realizing it.” Getting the discussion going between commissioners and their publics is the critical start. “Heading into the fall, the more involvement they can get, the more robust their plan is going to be. That is why we let those brainstorming sessions go off in some direction because we’re trying to dig out some of those additional ideas that may not have been spoken before or they may not have thought of. The more people we can get involved, the more ideas they can bring.”

Getting from “resolution” to “policy”

CDI 2022 District-Approved Resolutions: Next Steps

Iowa SWCD commissioners spoke their minds with a vote, both in pre-conference and after lively floor debate during the CDI 2022 Annual Conference held in August. Those votes determined the ‘thumbs up or down’ fate of resolutions presented by individual districts for consideration by their statewide fellow commissioners. CDI resolutions put the full weight of an elected body behind calls for government action and policy change. But once that resolution is approved – what happens next?

“If resolutions have a state significance, they’ll be formally presented to the State Soil Conservation & Water Quality Committee,” says CDI Executive Director John Whitaker. “If there are other state agencies that they should go before, we’ll take them before that. If they have federal significance, then we’d move them along to the NACD to see if NACD will adopt them.”

In the most recent round of resolution voting, Iowa SWCDs considered nine resolutions in pre-conference voting. Three resolutions were approved to be archived during pre-conference voting. These resolutions were previously approved at least five years ago and is required to be reviewed by commissioners to either continue to leave as a policy or to archive it either because the issue has been resolved or it is no longer relevant. One resolution passed (Power Utility Company Construction Practices to Prevent Soil Erosion); five did not reach the required 60% approval and therefore failed; and three resolutions received more than 50% positive votes, but less than 60%, and were then presented for debate at the August conference in Ames. Of those three resolutions to be discussed, two were approved: Summer Conservation Construction Window, Summer Construction Incentive Program. The third one – Increase Maximum Cover Crop Eligible for Cost Share – failed.

“One of those resolutions involves right-of-way,” says Whitaker, of the resolution approved pre-conference. “That will be taken to the Iowa Utilities Board and we will ask them if they’d be willing to make policy that requires this soil conservation on construction of wind farms on right-of-way.” Ultimately, the fate of a resolution lay not with committees, but with legislative bodies. “They stay in our policy at least five years, and if they are state issues – such as the soil health resolution a few years ago – and if there’s a bill introduced by a legislator, then we will lobby on that bill. And since our position is putting soil health in the Chapter 161.A, if there’s a bill we will lobby in favor of that.”

The critical thing commissioners and interested publics must remember, says Whitaker, is that before CDI officials can lobby the legislature, there has to be a bill drafted and presented to the Iowa legislature. “We have policy that’s great policy, that commissioners have passed – and I’m thinking particularly of the buffer strips – but there hasn’t been legislation introduced that we could support. I talked to legislators that I thought would be friendly to that and they just said, ‘It’s not the right timing to do that’, because they didn’t want to introduce it and lose right away. We have to find a legislator that will introduce legislation that we can actually support. We would gladly sign on to a buffer strip bill if there was one introduced, but there hasn’t been one introduced in the last three years.”

What that means for the fate of resolutions approved by more than 60% of Iowa SWCD commissioners or an annual conference floor vote may ultimately depend on one significant thing: “The importance of commissioners talking to their local legislators.” Whitaker says districts need to engage local legislators more often than is currently done. “Meet with them in the Fall if possible, before the session starts, probably after the November elections, so they’ll know what the issues are, know what the resolutions are.” Of course, he adds, “It’s a two-way street. Legislators should make the effort to reach out and try to meet with commissioners once a year and find out what their issues are. Legislators need to be interested in the districts, and the commissioners need to be interested in the legislators, as well.” One opportunity to meet with your local legislator makes a return soon, says Whitaker, and commissioners should be ready to take part. “Be prepared to participate in Partnership Day. We scheduled Partnership Day this coming year on Wednesday, January 11th.” This will be an opportunity to ask your local legislator: what’s next for CDI-supported public policy, and where do you stand?

2022 CDI Resolution Status

Passed in pre-conference vote:

- **Power Utility Company Practices to Prevent Soil Erosion (81% approval)**

Passed by floor vote during Annual Conference:

- **Summer Conservation Construction Window**
- **Summer Construction Incentive Program**

Failed by floor vote during Annual Conference:

- **Increase Maximum Cover Crop Acres Eligible for Cost Share**



Iowa Learning Farms Webinars

We encourage staff and commissioners to join these valuable weekly webinars, offering insights and updates on issues, updates, and how-to techniques of importance to committed conservation-minded Iowans. Participate in the live events, check out archived webinars from weeks past, and read a blog synopsis of up-coming sessions.

October ILF Webinar Schedule

- 10/5: Vinayak Shedekar, Ohio State University and Will Osterholz, USDA-ARS
- 10/12: Laura Alt, Iowa State University
- 10/19: Prashant Jha, Iowa State University
- 10/26: Matt Nowatzke, Iowa State University

Join live: [LINK](#)

View archives: [LINK](#)

Read future session blog: [LINK](#)

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9981 Pacific Street, Prairie City, IA 50228

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