

---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.



December 2022
Volume 4, Number 3

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From: CDI President Ramona Nitz

Happy New Year! May 2023 turn out to be everything you all could ever wish for!

In a few days, we will be gathering at our respective offices for our annual organizational meetings. For many districts, the faces around the table will be the same. But for some, that will not be the case. Commissioners, some of whom have been commissioners for many years, have decided to retire. Some due to health issues. Some because it's time to move on to other volunteer work. Some because it's just time to make a change. New commissioners will be sworn in to take their places. And those current commissioners who were recently re-elected will be taking their oath once again.

No matter if you are a retiring commissioner, a brand-new commissioner or one who is staying on, on behalf of all of us at CDI, I thank you for your commitment to soil and water conservation. As I reaffirm my oath on January 3 here in Cherokee, I will think of all of you and will be looking forward to working with you in the coming year.

Ramona

Save the Date!

January 11, 2023

CDI PARTNERSHIP DAY

Iowa Capitol, Des Moines!

For more information, see page 3

Executive Director Report – John Whitaker

Why Did This Happen? From 1993 to 2003, I served as a County Supervisor in Van Buren County. We were working on a watershed project involving the Fox River which had been straightened in the 1920s. The river was cutting a new channel in Missouri and that would have devastated several of our bridges in Van Buren County. As we worked on the project, funding was a major drawback but the county officials on the Missouri side of the line said they had plenty, but they would not share with us. I asked where they received their funding from, and they said from a sales tax fund that was constitutionally protected.

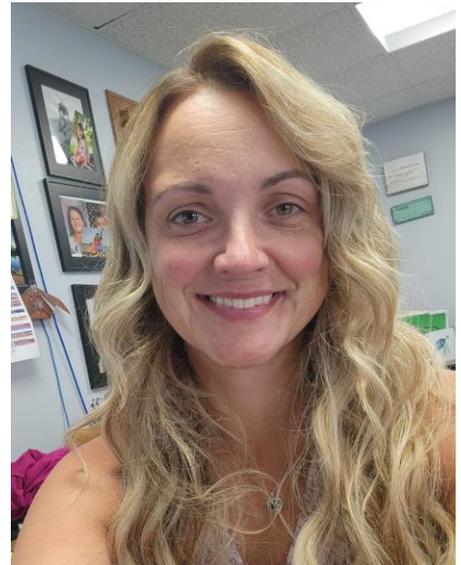
The first bill I introduced when I was elected to the Iowa Legislature, with only my name on it, was a bill to create a constitutionally protected fund in Iowa which would be specific to conservation and outdoor issues. That started a movement which became the Iowa's Water and Land Legacy constitutional amendment. Yes, there were legislators who were opposed to the idea for many reasons, but I truly believed that if we offered Iowans the chance to support conservation and outdoor issues, they would say yes. In 2010, after I had resigned from the legislature, Iowans did overwhelmingly say yes! The Trust Fund was created but after 12 years, it has never been funded. Now it is time to give our citizens what they want.

See page 5 for more perspective regarding IWLL from Iowa Soybean Association CEO Kirk Leeds

CDI Board Treasurer/SWCD Commissioner Rosol selected for leadership institute

The National Conservation Foundation (NCF) announced Bremer SWCD Commissioner and CDI Treasurer Angela Rosol has been honored as one of the seven participants selected to participate in the third cohort of the Next Generation Leadership Institute (NGLI). According to the NCF, Angela Rosol and her husband Casey began their farm operation as first-generation farmers 12 years ago by making hay for others. Now they grow row crops, and one day hope to incorporate livestock into their operation. Angela was raised to respect the land and hopes to instill that into her children - Rosalee and Rowdy.

NGLI was launched in August of 2019 as a year-long program to advance conservation leadership. Created in response to a high demand for leadership instruction for conservation district leaders facing the challenges of a changing world, NGLI was established to provide conservation professionals with the tools to become national leaders through personal, civic, and organizational leadership development. NGLI participants will meet for training sessions throughout the year, with a capstone session at the 2024 National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) Annual Meeting in San Diego, CA. NGLI's curriculum will equip leaders with skills and resources related to personal, civic, and organizational leadership development. This comprehensive training will help participants prepare to meet the future needs of natural resources management, helping them to increase their capacity to navigate and manage complex conservation challenges – both current and future – at the national level.



Bremer Commissioner Angela Rosol

CDI Partnership Day – January 11 – Des Moines!

A return to the rotunda: Iowa SWCD commissioners bring policy questions, concerns to face-to-face gathering with local lawmakers, district peers

For the first time in two years, Iowa’s SWCD commissioners can come together again on the capitol grounds in Des Moines, join their district partners and their respective legislators, and share face-to-face the concerns and questions critical for Iowa conservation. It’s a chance to be seen and be heard not to be missed, according to CDI leadership.

“Our voice needs to be heard. Put it on your calendar!”

-CDI Vice President Jeri Thornsberry

The January 11th “2022 CDI Partnership Day” at the Iowa capitol is an ideal opportunity to build relationships with lawmakers. CDI President Ramona Nitz encourages commissioners to come prepared. “Commissioners should research their local legislators, especially if those persons are new. They might want to do a little research on how

these people have voted before on conservation or get a feel where they usually stand. Come ready to take a few notes.” The day will start at 11:30 a.m., with commissioners gathering at the Wallace Building for some valuable training on effective use of their time with legislators, led by CDI lobbyist Jim Obradovich. (Free parking is available in the parking ramp by the Wallace Building).

“These people really *do* want to talk to us,” says Nitz. “We need them. There are so many new legislators that we haven’t met yet, and we need to make sure these new folks know who we are and what we do, and how dependent we are on their cooperation with us.”

CDI Vice President Jeri Thornsberry believes the event gives commissioners a two-fold opportunity. “They can reach out to their elected law makers and talk to them specifically about what’s important to conservation, and what’s important to them,” says Thornsberry. “And the second thing is, they get to interact with their fellow commissioners from all over the state and find out what their challenges are, what’s working for them, and it’s a great sharing opportunity. The more we can get together and talk to our compadres, the better off conservation will be in Iowa.”

How to take full advantage of “CDI Partnership Day”

Jim Obradovich

1. Be sure to let your State Representative(s) and State Senator(s) know you are coming to Partnership Day. About a week before the event send them an email and/or call them to invite them to visit you and CDI in the Capitol Rotunda (A short follow-up email “reminder” sent the day or so before Partnership Day is advisable as well)
2. Remember not all lawmakers are experts in soil and water conservation programs, projects and practices. Offer to explain to them what you do, how you do it, and why it is important.
3. Please, at the end of your conversations with lawmakers, offer to be an ongoing resource to them on soil and water issues. Let them know that if they have a question or concern, they can call you or CDI and we will get them the answer.
4. Finally, be yourself. What continues to make CDI a great (and effective) organization is the authenticity of its people. No “phony-bologna, slap-on-the-back” stuff from CDI, just real people who care deeply about our state’s greatest natural resources - our soil and water.

It would be a smart move for commissioners to let their legislators know they’re coming, says CDI Executive Director John Whitaker: “Ask them to be available for lunch. Ask them, ‘Can we grab a bite of lunch together in the capitol cafeteria?’ That’s really the best way, because then when the legislators get an open offer, they have to respond. There’s no good excuse to get out of that!”

Getting that face-to-face time with legislators is an essential responsibility for the active commissioner, says Thornsberry. “I don’t think we’re getting heard,” she says. “Lawmakers need to feel this enthusiasm from each of us, because if they can get how important it is, how important conservation practices are to the whole environment in Iowa, then they will see that funding is also important.”

“Farm the best, regenerate the rest”

Taylor SWCD ‘working lands project’ gets statewide attention

A unique incentive program initiated in 2016 for producers in Taylor County is now funded through 2024 by a “phenomenal” \$5.8 million RCCP grant aimed at expanding the concept to other counties. The “Southern Iowa Land Use Conversion Project” began as an IDALS-funded WQI project, created by Taylor SWCD commissioners facing a known issue with local soil and field conditions. Commissioners knew many cropped acres were prone to erosion because of thin soils on side hills and runoff, but existing programs were not meeting the challenge. According to project coordinator Erin Ogle, a completely new, original approach was needed. “It starts with our commissioners,” Ogle says. “This was their idea, they saw a need and wanted to address it. They spent months crafting how to create something that would be beneficial to producers. This would truly be a working lands project, so that producers don’t fully retire their ground, like CRP.”



Project Coordinator Erin Ogle

Ogle says one “mastermind” behind the original move to address Taylor County soil issues was then-Taylor SWCD Chair (now Assistant Commissioner) Jerry Fine. Finding the right approach took time, but the result was an incentive program both IDALS and local producers could support and join. “Those of us who farm it every day know that some soils will not produce,” says Fine. “We had several discussions on productivity of the soils and the erosion we had seen in our fields in southern Iowa. We went back and forth on what should be done rather than what was being done. We decided we need to come up with a way to identify the actual loss that occurs on some of those soils when they’re all farmed together in a field – maybe the overall yield was good enough that the whole field made a profit, but when you actually sat down and look at the returns on the specific soil you find out the rate of return might have been better if you hadn’t even farmed some of it with the expenses that you got.”

Special software is used to help producers measure ROI on specific field locations. With that software, says Ogle, “I can outline their field, I can indicate what their most current or their rotation has been in the past. They can use satellite imagery, or they can input their actual yield data from the combine and this program will generate their return on investment, so they can see which areas of the field are ‘red’ or negative, or where they’re breaking even, or where they’re profiting.” With that data, producers can sign up for financial incentives to seed down marginal crop acres that are not profitable or productive.

“If we could build back the soils in those areas rather than just farm them as a whole field, maybe they would recover and would have the potential to produce with a profit down the road,” says Fine. “That’s how we came up with targeting some of those thin spots of the side hills that tend to wash. We got to protect them from runoff, and then start building them back up.” The incentive practices primarily focus on hay or pasture plantings or a small grain crop followed by a summer/fall grazing mix, offering the benefits of these perennial or extended-rotation systems. To date, 4700 acres are signed up in Taylor County for incentives, on 311 fields.

Says current Taylor SWCD Vice Chair Paul Ackley, the focus on perennial approaches in the field should be the future of farming. “I think the soils need perennials in that system, especially on the slopes where the soil is thin,” Ackley says. “We absolutely want to keep it going, it’s as important as it ever was. What we do now in typical farming is just an extractive situation. The current production model of farming is nothing but slow mining and is not sustainable long-term; it’s not a long-term solution.”

For project coordinator Erin Ogle, the “pretty phenomenal” nearly \$6 million RCCP federal dollars – known as the “Iowa Working Lands Conservation Partnership” with lead partner IDALS – will help promote the idea statewide of working to make marginal lands productive and profitable again. Already, the commissioners of Page SWCD have signed on and will take the incentive program to their county producers. “I try to make it easy,” says Ogle. “I think that’s why we’ve had so much success because producers find it easy. The funding is readily available, there’s no waiting on it, we have it. It’s just a seeding that you’re able to utilize for livestock, for hay, or if you want to use it for wildlife, it’s a very easy and straightforward project, and I think that’s why so many producers have found it useful for them.” **For details on specific practices, acreage incentive amounts, and sign-up, visit the [Taylor SWCD website](#).**

The Time is Now for the Iowa Legislature to Finally Fund Iowa's Water and Land Legacy

By Kirk Leeds

Iowa Soybean Association CEO

It has been my great privilege to serve Iowa's farmers as the CEO of the Iowa Soybean Association for the last three decades. During this time, I have heard Iowa farmer leaders on countless occasions express the need to maintain our current regime of voluntary conservation practices, how Iowa farmers must do more to improve water quality, and how we need more state and federal funding to meet Iowa producers' demand for conservation practices. I have also observed how farmers in our neighboring states of Missouri and Minnesota enjoy a competitive advantage over Iowa farmers in terms of state funding for conservation practices thanks to constitutional amendments in those states that provide dedicated funding for conservation.



Even though the Iowa's Water and Land Legacy constitutional amendment passed with the overwhelming support of 63% of Iowa's voters in 2010, the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund has yet to be funded. That's because unlike Missouri and Minnesota, where the state sales taxes were increased the day after the elections when their citizens voted to adopt constitutional amendments, the Iowa constitution holds that Iowa voters lack the authority to increase the state sales tax. Only the Iowa governor and Iowa legislature have that authority. The time is now for Governor Reynolds and the Iowa Legislature to act and finally provide sustainable long-term funding for natural resources conservation for the benefit of farmers and all Iowans. Governor Reynolds championed this issue in 2019 and 2020, before the effort was derailed by the COVID-19 epidemic. We anticipate that Senator Dawson will once again introduce creative tax neutral legislation that would finally fund the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust and modernize the Iowa tax code without any overall tax increase by eliminating the Local Option Sales Tax.

Doing so would provide an estimated \$220 million per year for the conservation of Iowa's precious natural resources, including nearly \$150 million each year to improve water quality, including paying farmers for voluntary conservation practices like cover crops, no till, and wetlands restoration. Had the state sales tax been increased in Iowa immediately after the election in 2010, we would have seen over \$2 Billion for conservation over the last twelve years. That's roughly half of the estimated costs to implement the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy. What a difference that would have made for improving Iowa's water quality! The Iowa Soybean Association and our farmer leaders applaud Governor Reynolds and Senator Dawson for their leadership on Iowa's Water and Land Legacy in recent years. We call on Iowa's legislators to finally fund the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund in 2023, so we can meet Iowa farmers' tremendous demand for conservation practices and fully implement the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy. We can't afford to waste another decade.

Iowa Soybean Association is a valued sponsor of CDI.

CDI co-sponsors inaugural award

Pinhook Farm receives Iowa's first Leopold Conservation Award

Pinhook Farm of Clarinda has been selected as the recipient of the inaugural Iowa Leopold Conservation Award. Pinhook Farm's owners, Seth, Christy, Spencer and Tatum Watkins were presented with the \$10,000 award at The Big Soil Health Event in Cedar Falls. The Watkins family owns 320 acres and rent another 2,790 acres to grow the grass, hay and corn

needed to feed their herd of 600 beef cow-calf pairs. Seth also manages about 900 acres of crops, prairie, and forests for other landowners across Page, Taylor and Adams counties.



Given in honor of renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold, the prestigious award recognizes farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners who inspire others with their dedication to land, water, and wildlife habitat management on private, working lands.

"All of the nominees for the inaugural Leopold Conservation Award in Iowa truly exemplify family farming and caring for the land. One look at what the Watkins family has done provides an impressive goal for other farmers," said John Whitaker, Conservation Districts of Iowa Executive Director. Sand County Foundation and national sponsor American Farmland Trust annually present the Leopold Conservation Award to farmers, ranchers and forestland owners in 24 states for extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation. In Iowa, the award is presented with state partners: Conservation Districts of Iowa, Farmers National Company, and Practical Farmers of Iowa.

"Pinhook Farm is a worthy first recipient of this award in Iowa," said Sally Worley, Practical Farmers of Iowa Executive Director. "All of Iowa's inaugural class of applicants are inspiring examples of conservation in action on farms. We're grateful to the Sand County Foundation for bringing the Leopold Conservation Award to Iowa. It's important that we continue to recognize and lift up the Iowa farmers and ranchers who are prioritizing conservation on their working lands."

"The landowner plays a critical role in the conservation of America's farmland resources. Sustainable practices not only benefit the local environment and community, but also improves the quality and value of the land as an asset for the current owner and future generations," said Clayton Becker, Farmers National Company President. "This is why Farmers National Company is honored to sponsor this prestigious award recognizing hard work and commitment to conservation."

ABOUT PINHOOK FARM

The land Seth farms with his wife Christy, and children Spencer and Tatum, has been in his family since 1848. His ancestors inherited deep, rich soils on the Southern Iowa Drift Plain, but that changed over time. Prairie was plowed under to grow corn. Erosion from gullies and ditches increased while biodiversity diminished. Early on, Seth seeded new pastures for rotational grazing, and used cover crops and a no-till cropping system to reduce erosion while increasing the soil's capacity to infiltrate and hold water. He relied on geospatial technology to determine which conservation practices would benefit different parts of the farm. Seth removed ditches, built 14 ponds and established a wetland to naturally drain hundreds of acres of his farmland. Another 42 ponds have been built on land under his management. To diversify his farm's income and provide wildlife habitat, Seth regularly plants nut and fruit-bearing trees around ponds that are restricted from livestock.

In 2023, our mission continues:
Conservation Districts of Iowa informs, educates and leads Iowans through our local soil and water conservation districts to promote conservation of natural resources.



John Whitaker
Executive Director



Carlee Sabus
Program Director



Brooks Bechtold
Wetland Easement Specialist



Claire Carlson
NE Planning Coordinator



Cara Marker-Morgan
Director Golden Hills RC&D;
SW Planning Coordinator



Lance Brisbois
Deputy Director
Golden Hills RC&D;
SW Planning Coordinator

Not pictured:
Connor Langan
Wildlife Specialist



Erin Nichols
Wetland Easement Specialist



Alyssa Comer
SW Planning Coordinator



Austin Waters
Wildlife Specialist



Madison Conley
NW Planning Coordinator



Rory Martinson
Wildlife Specialist



Joe Hayes
Communications Coordinator

From all your friends at Conservation Districts of Iowa:
Happy New Year and Best Wishes for Continued Success in 2023!