

---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.



July 2024
Volume 5, Number 10

CDI EXECUTIVE BOARD:

President: Jeri Thornsberry
Vice-President: Don Elsbernd
Treasurer: Jack Boyer
Secretary: Mary Ellen Miller
Past President: Ramona Nitz

CDI OFFICE STAFF:

Executive Director: Dien Judge
Program Manager: Carlee Sabus
Communications: Joe Hayes

Office Phone: 515-289-8300

Office Address:

Conservation Districts of Iowa
2015 Grand Ave. (Box #15)
Des Moines, IA. 50312

Website: <https://cdiowa.org>

From: President Jeri Thornsberry

With only three weeks before we convene our 78th Annual Conference of Iowa's Soil and Water Commissioners, scheduled for August 19-20, 2024, in Ames, I want to ensure you have all the necessary information for a productive and enjoyable event.

Conference Details:

- **Dates:** August 19-20, 2024
- **Location:** Gateway Hotel and Conference Center, Ames
- **Registration:** Opens at 7:00 a.m. on Monday, August 19, in the Hallway of the Gateway Hotel and Conference Center. Please arrive early to avoid delays. The conference will commence promptly at 9:00 a.m.
- **Accommodation:** Consider arriving on Sunday, August 18, if you cannot reach the conference center by 8:15 a.m. on Monday morning. Hotel accommodations for Sunday night are covered by IDALS for commissioners and assistant commissioners, at no cost to you.

Theme: This year's conference theme is "*Sowing Tomorrow's Harvest: Charting the Future of Soil and Water Conservation in Iowa,*" focusing on upcoming trends and innovations in our field.

Agenda Highlights:

- Speakers and presenters will discuss new developments in soil and water conservation.
- Annual business meeting to discuss and vote on a single resolution and elect officers. No changes to the bylaws are scheduled.

Additional Activities:

- **Silent Auction:** Please consider bringing an item for our Silent Auction, which supports our Scholarship Program. Maybe you have a treasure in your home or barn that would be perfect for this auction.
- **Ice Cream Social:** Hosted by your officers and regional directors. Judge their serving skills!
- **Door Prizes:** Don't miss the chance to win!

As a conservation leader, your attendance is crucial to stay informed and represent your counties effectively. We look forward to seeing you and sharing insights at this important gathering. Please register at your earliest convenience if you have not already done so. Your participation matters greatly to the success of our conference and to our conservation mission. Can't wait to see you all!

Executive Director Report – Dien Judge

It's hard to believe how fast a year can pass by us. It's been one year since I started on the job here at Conservation Districts of Iowa, and it's amazing how fast it has gone. Reflecting back on the year that has passed, CDI has organized some important events that have helped this organization fulfill the mission of conservation.

Our 2023 Annual Conference last summer provided networking and training opportunities, and through the resolutions process, made your voices heard at the state and national level.

In October, I joined my colleagues at a meeting of the Association of Conservation Executive Directors, for a wonderful learning experience. Conservation Executive Directors from all around the USA were there to share ideas and learn from one another about how things are done in other parts of the country. It's amazing to me how differently each state organizes their conservation programs. I learned how privileged we are in Iowa to have such strong partnerships between the local, the state and the federal agencies as well as private organizations.

CDI also organized the annual Conservation Partnership Day at the Iowa Capitol, creating an opportunity for local commissioners to speak directly with lawmakers and administration officials at the Capitol.

In February, I joined CDI officers at the National Association of Conservation Districts Annual Meeting to represent Iowa's interests at the national level and in March, CDI carried your message to Washington D.C. where we met with elected officials and staff from every office of Iowa's Congressional delegation. Making your voices heard is one of our top priorities, and we will continue to make the case for conservation programs at every level.

Throughout the year, we've also expanded our staff at CDI through a new cooperative agreement with NRCS. This program is providing much needed help to get projects completed at local offices. We're proud of what has been accomplished at CDI throughout the last year, and we look forward to this year's Annual Conference. We hope to see you there!

In other news, CDI continues to hire new people in our Administrative Support Staff program. When fully staffed, this program will employ 25 administrative support specialists around the state. We currently have 22 of the 25 positions filled. We are still taking applications for the positions in Denison and Keosauqua. If you know of anyone looking for a job in conservation, please send them to our website: <https://www.cdiowa.org/who-we-are/job-openings/>

CDI actively raises funds to cover the costs of our scholarships, and we want to thank every Soil & Water Conservation District and individual who donated to this worthy cause. We are preparing the next generation of conservationists, and the future is bright.

CDI Annual Conference August 19-20

Registration is still open, the agenda is set, important business is ready for debate, discussion and policy resolutions await your input – with still plenty of time for meeting up with colleagues and friends, old and new! (Did we mention great food and comfortable accommodations?) (Special sponsor exhibits?) (Fun tours for your guests?) (*The Ice Cream Social!*) The 78th CDI Annual Conference, August 19-20, in Ames brings SWCD commissioners and assistant commissioners together with state partners for two days exchanging ideas vital to the future of Iowa soil and water quality – a true ‘It’s important you be there with us!’ event.

IDALS covers all costs of lodging and scheduled meals for commissioners and assistant commissioners!
Registering for the conference and hotel reservation is easy and quick. To register: [CDI Annual Conference](#).

Featured speakers bring focus to critical conservation issues



Secretary Mike Naig

Monday, August 19, 2024

Welcome from Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig

Mike Naig grew up on a family farm in the northwest corner of the state near Cylinder, Iowa and he continues to be involved in the operation today. Mike is a graduate of Buena Vista University in Storm Lake with degrees in biology and political science. Mike was elected as the 15th Iowa Secretary of Agriculture in November 2018.

Monday, August 19, 2024

Afternoon session – State Climatologist Justin Glisan

“Resiliency: Intersection of Water Quality, Soil Health & Changing Weather”

As the State Climatologist, Dr. Glisan compiles and processes Iowa climate data for current and future weather data research needs. This includes preparing the weekly weather summary for the Iowa Crop Progress and Condition Report from April 1 through Nov. 30 and the monthly Iowa weather summary. Dr. Glisan graduated from Iowa State University in 2012 and continued as a post-doctoral atmospheric scientist until he was hired as a research atmospheric scientist by Iowa State.



Justin Glisan



Michell Hora

Monday, August 19, 2024

Awards Banquet – Michell Hora, Continuum Ag

“Embracing Regenerative Agriculture: Proactive Strategies”

The 7th generation Iowa farmer, Mitchell founded Continuum Ag in 2015 to help farmers quantify and improve their soil health. The company’s TopSoil Tool helps farmers garner agronomic insights and profit from environmental outcomes, like carbon sequestration. Since launching TopSoil in 2020, Continuum Ag has amassed a footprint of 36 states and 14 countries and one of the largest private soil health databases. The market efforts have expanded via the more than 350 TopSoil Network Consultants and the Continuum enterprise customers. www.continuum.ag

Tuesday, August 20, 2024

Morning session - Eric Dirth, Assistant AG, Environmental Division of the Iowa AG Office

“Enriching Commissioner’s Knowledge: Legal Primer for Commissioners’ Roles & Responsibilities”

Eric Dirth is an Assistant Attorney General in the Environmental Division of the Iowa Attorney General’s Office. He is legal counsel for Iowa DNR, the Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, Iowa’s Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and the Iowa State Fair. He litigates environmental enforcement actions against solid waste, air quality and water quality violators. Dirth earned an MA in environmental advocacy in 2015 and graduated from University of Iowa College of Law in 2018.



Eric Dirth

East Pottawattamie SWCD

Bringing together the *Local Working Group* – and keeping it together



East Pott Chair Kami Willett

The role of the Local Working Group (LWG) for prioritizing objectives in district planning assures that conservation goals meet community expectations. The challenge is: developing the LWG, and once created, sustaining it for the longer term. East Pottawattamie SWCD meets the challenge with community relationship building by their proactive team.

“At the beginning of the year, we knew that this was our year for our 5-year plan to come up for renew,” says East Pott Chair Kami Willett, of the district 5-year *Soil & Water Resource Conservation Plan (SWRCP)*. “And so we talked about it as a group early on. We put a timeline together of who we want in our community meeting and mapped it out so we had some ideas. We basically made a list of everybody that we could think of that is in our area that impacts what we do at different levels or have different views to share – local farmers and community business owners, bankers, land managers, and obviously County Board of Supervisors because we work with them a lot.”

The commission set the date – April 4th – worked out the logistics, and sent out postcards inviting their prospective LWG members to a community meeting with a description of the purpose and objectives. “We let them know that their input can make sure we're doing the best for conservation here in East Pott,” Willett says.



East Pott SWCD's April 4th community meeting. “The room was packed. We had a very engaged group. And the folks that couldn't make it that particular day gave us feedback that we could also bring forward.” – East Pott Chair Kami Willett.

The turnout for that first April meeting surpassed hopes. “The room was packed. We had a very engaged group. And the folks that couldn't make it that particular day gave us feedback that we could also bring forward.” Six critical conservation categories had been developed to focus discussion (*see box next page*). “We went through every single one of the six categories in detail with our community group and got everybody's feedback. Our board's going to review if there's any changes. Once we have that we're going to send it out to those who attended. We want them to see if there's anything they want to add.”

Continued next page

CDI Planner Madison Conley helps facilitate SWRCP planning for East Pott, including updating district demographics specific to East Pott and developing a template for the LWG meeting. “When we were working on updating the 5-year plan, we developed a draft we could send back to the Local Working Group members so they could get a visual of how their valuable input and contributions added to the planning process,” Conley says, adding that East Pott’s success with their LWG meeting indicates the district’s priority of keeping community contacts active.

“What made East Pott have success with their Local Working Group meeting was continuing to reach out and engage these community members who have been involved with this SWCD for some time and maintaining that relationship,” says Conley. “With East Potawatomie, just keeping that relationship in mind and valuing their insight and perspective has been an integral part of having their Local Working Group members stick around and having such great turnout.”

Willett echoes the importance of sustaining local relationships. “We actually do a lot with our community partners,” she says. “We’re very fortunate here to have a lot of community participation.” For example, East Pott invites contacts to their annual awards night, where updates of district activity is reviewed. “We encourage input from the community on our social media sites, at the front desk, everywhere. When we have community events we encourage people to collaborate with us.”

The key to creating a Local Working Group begins with those first introductory meetings and securing community attendance. East Pott Commissioner and Region 5 Director Pete Hobson says “timing” is the first consideration.

“Pick a time of year that farmers aren't busy. That's number one,” says Hobson. “We were lucky when they came on April 4th. So don't do it in late April or May. Do it in the off-season. But then also you got to get to these farm managers and bankers, the people that are really involved – the local agronomy centers and farm service co-ops. And the big players in agriculture – you got to make sure you can get in contact with them to see what really fits their needs.”

Willett says contacts through email and post cards are important, and work as a communication tool. “However, the thing that's most impactful is the face-to-face,” she says. “And that means taking the time to stop and take your annual newsletter or something like that and dropping it off. East Pott is about to have their fair next month. Take the time to go to that (in your county). We take our soil demonstration to the fair; we set up a booth and we talk to people. They don’t know what they don’t know, they need to hear it from us. What has been a big success is the dedication of this office and this board and all of our assistants getting out there and doing that face-to-face time. So there's nothing that replaces that face-to-face of telling people what we do.”

CDI Planner Conley adds that a Local Working Group is not just for a meeting once a year, but to assist an SWCD with their goals as time goes on. “Not only with their 5-year plan, but for anything they need to do regarding partnerships or issues that arise. They are those community members an SWCD should be able to rely on, and they're there to help.”

Says Kami Willett: “Every single business has some type of impact in soil and water conservation. And so that's how we look at it. And everybody brings something to the plate. Everybody's got something that they can bring to help out.”

Six Conservation Categories

The East Pott SWCD community meeting discussion invited priorities for the following 6 categories:

Soil Resources

Soil health, erosion, tillage, farming methods, absentee landowners, etc.

Water Resources

Water quality, runoff, erosion, nitrates/phosphates, etc.

Recreation and Wildlife

Parks, available opportunities, habitats, invasive species, etc.

Conservation Practices

Edge of field practices, absentee landowners, education, etc.

Urban & Rural

Programs, schools, urban/rural entities, etc.

Miscellaneous

Air quality, incentives, regulations, sustainability, etc.

Mobile Education Exhibit returns, available for reservations

Special from Iowa DNR

After a brief hiatus, the Iowa DNR is excited to announce the return of our Mobile Education Exhibit - an incredible way to learn about how your everyday activities impact the environment and what you can do to reduce your impact through changes to consumption and management of energy, food, water and waste.

The Mobile Education Exhibit is an all-inclusive, mobile experience which uses interactive kiosks and informative displays to show how what you do at home affects the environment. It features different rooms found in a typical home and highlights the things you can do in each space to lessen your impacts at home and on Iowa's natural resources.



“We are thrilled to reopen reservations and share the exhibit with Iowans once again,” said Amy Wilken, the DNR’s Land Quality Program Planner. “We’re excited for Iowans to rediscover this interactive, hands-on approach to learning about the environment and being a positive steward of our natural resources through small changes at home.” The exhibit is equipped with touch screen computer games, flat screen TVs and interactive displays showcasing topics such as sustainability, recycling, household hazardous materials, and water and energy conservation. The mobile education exhibit can easily accommodate 20 to 25 persons at a time, and is available year-round for reservations.

Young children and adults can see several examples of how simple exercises like unplugging your electronics when not in use or replacing leaky faucets can have a huge impact not only in your home, but on the environment. The best part? You don’t have to worry about getting it there, because we will bring the exhibit to you! Contract Transport, Inc in Des Moines transports the trailer before and after events. The exhibit can be powered via the on-board generator, and can also be plugged in (220V, 60 amp). It is also handicapped accessible, heated and air conditioned so it can be used every day, in every season. Science teachers, environmental educators, recycling coordinators, event managers, community leaders and solid waste professionals are encouraged to use the exhibit for their events. The exhibit is also a wonderful tool for use at fairs, promotional events, and conferences.

To request the exhibit, fill out the [online reservation form](#). Applications are accepted throughout the year. Please register as soon as possible to reserve the exhibit for your event (Note: Delivery and pick up will be on weekdays only). A deposit of \$500 is required to secure your reservation and will be refunded upon return and inspection of the exhibit. For more information, contact Amy Wilken, DNR, Amy.Wilken@dnr.iowa.gov.

Expanding staff from 9 to 15 in-the-field specialists and technicians

CDI puts more “boots on the ground” to help advance landowners’ conservation goals



Earlier this summer, CDI Private Lands staff joined a group of approximately 50 specialists from Iowa DNR and other partner organizations in northwest Iowa for the 2024 Iowa DNR Private Lands Program Meeting. (Pictured are CDI Private Lands Specialists and partner staff. Nick Baumgarten, third from the left.)

A series of CDI employment positions is about to renew and expand the work they do directly with landowners interested in conservation and securing the financial resources to make it happen. CDI Private Lands Wildlife Specialists and Conservation Wetland Specialists will now be joined by Wetland Engineering Technicians in a new agreement CDI secured with partners for the benefit of farmers – and local goals for districts – statewide.

According to CDI Executive Director Dien Judge, the new positions will grow efforts to bring much-needed help for conservation-minded landowners. “Since 2016, CDI has had a partnership agreement with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, which is funded through the NRCS, to employ private lands wildlife and wetland specialists,” Judge said. “They’re CDI employees, they work directly with the DNR and the NRCS, and they are boots on the ground conservation workers who will help get the job done out in the field. They work all around the state.”

That work will continue and expand. Judge said the updated agreement increases CDI’s current line-up from nine to 15 full-time positions (the “Private Lands Wildlife Specialist” has a new title: “Land and Water Conservationist”):

- **Five Conservation Wetland Specialists (increased from four)**
- **Five Wetland Engineering Technicians (a new position)**
- **Five Land and Water Conservationists**

As DNR’s Wildlife Bureau Private Lands Program Coordinator, Nick Baumgarten works to help coordinate private lands efforts that get conservation on the ground, working directly with CDI partners.

Continued next page

Baumgarten details what the responsibilities of each position will be, and the benefits their work brings to landowners – and by extension, to the goals and work of local soil and water conservation districts:

Land and Water Conservationist

The renamed “Land and Water Conservationist” is more of a “generalist type position”, said Baumgarten. “They are not solely focused on wetland restoration or enhancement. They’ll work with any of the Farm Bill programs. It depends on what the landowners’ goals are and which, if any, financial assistance program would work best to help facilitate that. And so they work with landowners to promote conservation practices on the landscape. It can be very broad, anything from CRP or wildlife habitat to cover crops. They’ll provide technical assistance to landowners and then help work through the process using Farm Bill programs that get conservation implemented on the landscape. That’s their main mission.”

Conservation Wetland Specialist

The Conservation Wetland Specialist will be focused on providing “technical assistance to those landowners with the goal of implementing wetland practices on private lands in Iowa.”

Wetland Engineering Technician

“This engineering tech is a new position for us,” said Baumgarten. “There is a backlog of engineering type work that needs to get done and if we provide this service, then we can help ensure that more capacity is there to help engineer these wetland practices. The Conservation Wetland Specialist will help more with program delivery in a broader sense, and the Wetland Engineering Technicians will work with design and implementation of those specific projects. But those two positions will likely work quite a bit together, and they will work primarily on the agricultural conservation easement programs and CRP.”

Baumgarten emphasized that all the CDI positions will be working on private lands and often working lands, but the objective is to promote environmental benefits for a

profitable operation. “While we are promoting conservation practices, it obviously has to blend with landowner goals. So one of the things I like to say is that when we are working with landowners, we are trying to marry their conservation goals with our technical expertise to find where those things blend together.”

For SWCDs statewide, these expanded and new CDI positions will bring added support to shared goals. “These are the types of things that soil and water conservation districts are concerned with – providing that service to landowners so that they can have technical assistance when they’re trying to reach their conservation goals on their operation, and work through the different financial assistance programs. Having more capacity in those areas to help with those types of projects is a big deal.”

CDI Executive Director Dien Judge believes this new agreement is another example of the unique approach Iowa embraces for environmental sustainability. “Our state is organized in a way that other states aren’t,” said Judge. “Think of it as the three-legged stool – NRCS, the local districts, and the state. We all work together to get the job done. We’re lucky to have the effective partnership system we have in the state with conservation. The federal, the state, and the local. It’s very effective.”

“When we are working with landowners, we are trying to marry their conservation goals with our technical expertise to find where those things blend together.”
 -Nick Baumgarten