

---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: President Jeri Thornsberry

Reflecting on the 78th Annual

Soil and Water Conservation Commissioners Conference

As we wrap up our 78th Annual Soil and Water Conservation Commissioners Conference, I want to take a moment to reflect on the incredible energy and inspiration that filled the room. This year's theme, "Sowing Tomorrow's Harvest: Charting the Future of Soil and Water Conservation in Iowa," truly captured our commitment to envisioning and shaping the future of conservation.

Our discussions and workshops were a testament to the innovative spirit that drives our mission. With unprecedented conservation funding available, reminiscent of the support not seen since the Dust Bowl era, we are presented with a unique opportunity to accelerate our efforts and make a lasting impact. The enthusiasm and collaboration evident throughout the conference reaffirm our collective dedication to building resilience in Iowa's soil and water systems.

It was heartening to witness the vibrant exchange of ideas and the deepening of connections among our conservation family. The chance to step away from our daily routines and immerse ourselves in learning and collaboration is invaluable. A special thank you goes out to our partners for their insightful updates and to the presenters for their expert knowledge.

As we look ahead, I encourage all commissioners and assistant commissioners to prioritize attendance at these crucial gatherings. We are each asked to participate in three key events annually: the Spring Regionals, Conservation Partnership Day at the Capitol (March 11, 2025), and the Annual Conference. By engaging fully in these opportunities, we enhance our ability to support our county constituents and advance our shared goals.

Stay tuned for announcements about the dates for the Spring Regionals and the 2025 Annual Conference. I look forward to seeing even more of you there at conference next year as we continue to chart the future of soil and water conservation together.

Thank you all for your dedication and commitment.

Executive Director Report – Dien Judge

I'd like to start with a big THANK YOU to everyone who was involved in the planning and organization of our 2024 Annual Conference. This was a tremendously rewarding experience to be involved with this event from start to finish, and I think it was a success. We had more than 110 Soil and Water Commissioners and Assistant Commissioners in attendance this year, along with dozens and dozens of staff from NRCS and the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship. This was a great crowd, but we would really like to grow this conference. Planning is already underway for our 2025 Annual Conference, which will be held August 24-26 at the Gateway Hotel & Conference Center in Ames. Please mark your calendars now and plan to attend the conference next year! If you chose not to attend the annual conference this year, we'd like to know why. Please communicate with your Regional Director about ways you think we could improve the conference and raise our attendance levels.

Now that the annual conference is behind us, it's time to think about the calendar ahead. There are several events in 2025 that have been set, so please put these items on your calendar as well:

Spring Regionals will be held during the last week in February and the first week in March (specifically on Feb. 25,26 and 27, and on March 4,5 and 6). Actual location dates and times have not yet been finalized, but those plans will be announced later this fall.

Conservation Partners Day at the Iowa Capitol will be held on Tuesday, March 11. This is an opportunity for commissioners and assistant commissioners to come together during the Iowa Legislative Session at the Capitol to meet with legislators in person. Please mark your calendars and make sure to plan to attend.

In other news, CDI is beginning two new partnership agreements with NRCS to bring more boots-on-the-ground conservation workers to Iowa. In the weeks ahead, we will be hiring five Wetland Engineering Technicians, two Land & Water Conservationists, two Conservation Wetland Specialists and one Conservation Planning Coordinator. Please check <https://www.cdiowa.org/who-we-are/job-openings/> for more information about job opportunities with CDI.

Thornsberry returns to leadership, Wessels assumes new role



Returning CDI President Jeri Thornsberry

CDI President Jeri Thornsberry begins her second year as CDI president with the Annual Conference business meeting affirming her reelection, and Dallas SWCD Chair Eric Wessels will take over Vice President responsibilities, as then current Vice President Don Elsbernd steps away from that position. Both ran unopposed.

Thornsberry has long experience in leadership positions with CDI, beginning in 2012 accepting a position with the CDI Board of Directors, then board secretary from 2016-2020, and CDI Vice President in 2021-2023. Thornsberry is Chair of Blackhawk SWCD.



New CDI Vice President Eric Wessels

Eric Wessels is an architect, focusing on environmental and sustainable design since the mid-1980s. In his candidacy appeal to the conference, Wessels said his work motivated him to run for an open seat as write-in candidate for his local SWCD, believing the work of the SWCD is an extension of his sustainability efforts.

78th Annual Conference theme:

“Sowing Tomorrow’s Harvest: Charting the Future of Soil and Water Conservation in Iowa”

Honoring a year of conservation success, of policy change and challenges, and making ready for what’s next helped drive the messaging during two days at the 78th Annual Conference of Iowa’s Soil and Water Commissioners. CDI President Jeri Thornsberry welcomed commissioners and assistant commissioners on day one: “What is this theme? ‘Sowing Tomorrow’s Harvest’? As soil and water commissioners, our role in shaping the future of conservation in Iowa is critical. Let us plant the seeds of innovation, sustainability, and resilience today so together we may reap the bountiful harvest for Iowa’s future. That’s what our program is all about.”



Featured speaker, Iowa Ag Secretary Mike Naig

Over the next two days at the Gateway Center in Ames this month, commissioners and guests heard insights and explored conservation-critical developments in a wide range of issues – leveraging partnerships public and private, regenerative ag, cattle and working lands RCPP update, the future of ethanol, watershed structures, reaching urban gardeners and beginning farmers, a legal primer of the SWCD commissioner’s role and responsibilities. Four districts were recognized for their progress developing and sustaining goals in their Five-Year plans: Cedar, East Pott, Sioux and Winneshiek. And returning for a second year: “What’s on Commissioners’ Minds?” – and open conversation from the floor between attendees and state and federal partners.

Also returning: Iowa Secretary of Ag Mike Naig. “One year last year I announced at this conference that we had broken yet another record in terms of conservation adoption in the state of Iowa,” said Naig, in his pre-business meeting welcome. “I’m here again to announce that we have set yet another record in conservation adoption in the state of Iowa this year. That’s three years in a row. One of us doesn’t make that

happen – that’s a collective effort 100 of soil and water conservation districts, farmers, landowners and all kinds of public and private partners.” And those results were just state programs, he added. “It doesn’t even take into account the tremendous investment that’s coming in terms of federal spending, farmer and landowner investment, other partner investments.”

During the session, some of those responsible for progress in local conservation were recognized in [a series of annual awards](#), recognizing individuals and districts whose devotion to making conservation a priority in their respective fields.

“Bottom line, there’s never been more awareness, more resources, more people, more partners and more actual getting done than is done today,” said Naig, in closing. “And I say again: thank you for your work and making sure that this can be said year over year.”

Business Meeting Voting Results

During the morning business session, one resolution was presented for debate regarding rescinding a USDA funding of some animal practices eligible for conservation funding in the Inflation Reduction Act. The resolution failed. Commissioners heard from CDI leadership, state lobbyist, and reviewed financial reports for the year. Thornsberry was reelected CDI President, and Eric Wessels elected CDI Vice President (*see page 2*).



CDI President Jeri Thornsberry leads the agenda for the business session that opened the conference.

Snapshots

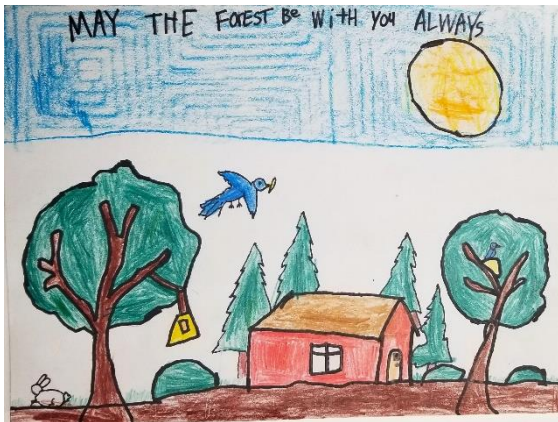
A walk-around view of Annual Conference action



**Check Out 2024
[Award Winner Photos](#)
on the CDI Webpage!**

CDI Poster Finalists Head for National Contest!

CDI Regional Directors selected the winning Iowa entries for the 2024 “CDI Poster Contest” during the Annual Conference in Ames. Youth statewide entered their ideas for promoting this year’s theme: “*May the Forest Be With You Always*”. The board chose one state winner from each of the five grade categories from regional winners. The five state winning posters will be sent to the NACD-sponsored national poster contest for consideration for a national award. Thank you to all our Iowa youth poster artists! We thank Grinnell Mutual for sponsoring the event, that includes cash prizes for the selected artists!



K-1 Roman Eisenbacher, Palo Alto SWCD



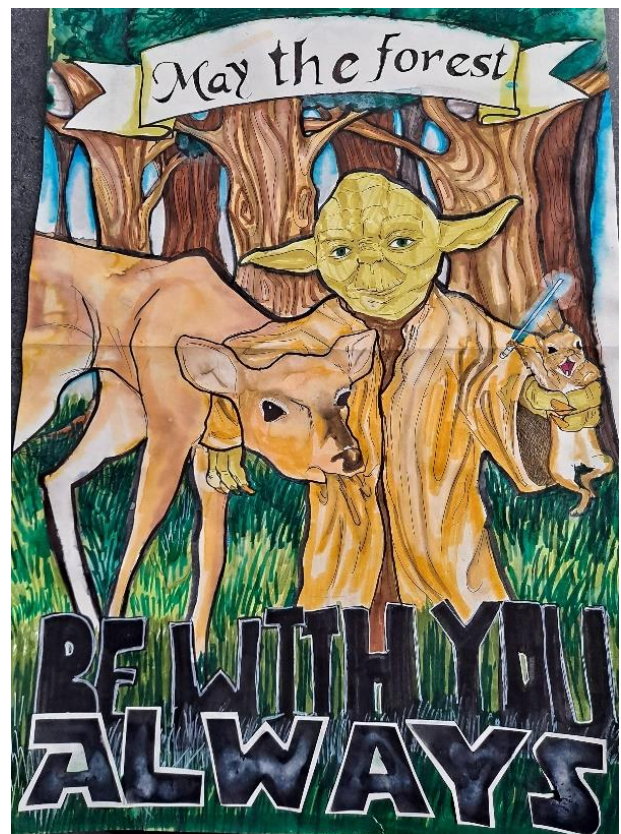
2-3 Bristol Bates, Cass SWCD



4-6 Chen Gao East Pottawattamie SWCD



10-12 Kiann Blomgren, Lyon SWCD



7-9 Adriana Ames, Jones SWCD

Polk SWCD: “Biology for Soil Health Workshop”

There are millions of reasons to dig deep into the health of soil – as in millions of living creatures that bring the “health” to the “soil”. The microbiology of soil is a topic of intense study by science – but one needing more attention – so Polk SWCD Watershed Coordinator Michael James organized a daylong workshop in July to share some of that science to farmers and landowners in central Iowa.

“For the past 20 years the scientific community has intensively studied the microbiology of soil,” James said. “What they have found is that soil biology influences the structure of soil, it influences nutrient cycling and that soil biology interacts directly with plants to release nutrients, transport water and mitigate disease and pest pressure.” Held at the Middleswart Lodge Nature Center near Indianola, the “Biology for Soil Health Workshop” was co-sponsored by Polk SWCD and [Midwest Soil Restore](#), which manufactures the “Johnson-Su” composting system, a method of putting “biology into the soil”, James said. He was assisted in managing the day’s events by interns Courtney Strousser from NRCS and Tess Kern from IDALS – both working with Polk SWCD.



Polk SWCD Watershed Coordinator Michael James. “Instead of ignoring the soil biology, we are now finding ways to promote it, and encourage a benefits that it provides.”



The “Regenerative Farmer Panel” featured Q&A from guests and moderator Michael James (far right) on what works, what works better in regenerative practices on the land, from farmers (l-r) Dennis McLaughlin, Caleb Akin, Levi Lyle, and Roger Elmore.

“It’s this idea we’ve had over the last 50-70 years that soil is a chemical matrix that we put chemistry on and we expect results based on a chemical interaction phase between the chemistry that we apply and the chemistry that’s in the soil,” said James. “What we now realize is that model is not 100% true. Biology plays a really important part in storing and releasing the nutrients that become bound to soil particles. For instance phosphorus. Phosphorus becomes bounded to soil particles very quickly and becomes basically inaccessible by the plants, unless you have soil biology that can release that phosphorus back into the soil. If you’re working to keep that process of soil biology to release that phosphorus, then you don’t have to put as much phosphorus on the soil next time.”

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Dr. Jared Flater, ISU researcher in agronomy (standing) opens the workshop with an overview of the importance of soil biology – “It’s worms, beetles, ants, pupae, bacteria, viruses – all working together to help promote nutrient cycling.”

Enrolled in an Iowa State University Master’s degree program, James used his contacts there for guest speaker suggestions, in addition to private industry experts from [Green Cover Seed](#), [Living Soil Compost Lab](#), and Midwest Soil Restore that included a demonstration of how the Johnson-Su compost system can be managed on the farm, by the farmer. “Midwest Soil Restore brought all their gear and all their equipment to show farmers that they could do this themselves.” Compost is generally thought of as a way to apply nutrients to the soil. However, the Johnson-Su compost method’s primary goal is to apply beneficial microbiology to increase overall soil health and function. The day also included a panel of three area farmers answering questions on successes and near misses in regenerative farming practices.

James advised farmer guests how attention to healthy microbiology in the soil can both protect the environment and profitability. “We now have a paradigm shift from soil being a chemical matrix that holds and releases the chemistry that we put to Soil, to a living breathing zone of plant and micro biological interaction. This understanding is beginning to change the way that we farm. Instead of ignoring the soil biology, we are now finding ways to promote it, and encourage a benefits that it provides. With this new knowledge, farmers are finding ways to reduce the amounts and therefore the costs of nutrient applications, and they are finding ways to reduce their pesticide and fungicide applications. All this while maintain or growing yields.” The Benefits for farmers and the community are extraordinary, said James. “Less nutrient pollution, lower farming costs, less chemicals in the environment and more nutrient dense foods.”



Steve Shivers of Midwest Soil Restore leads a demonstration of the Johnson-Su compost system, which farmers can manage at their own operation. The system puts a focus on applying microbiology to increase overall soil health.

Horizon II and CDI

New partnership seeks to bring new options, opportunities for farmers

The Conservation Districts of Iowa has entered a partnership with Roeslein Alternative Energy (RAE) in a pilot project that will work to demonstrate how farmers can earn environmental credit compensation and renewable energy revenue by planting prairie grasses and cover crops. (RAE) finalized an \$80 million grant from the federal government’s USDA “Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities” program. The funding will be used in a five-year pilot project in Iowa and Missouri called ‘Horizon II’ to demonstrate a “Climate-Smart Future for Corn, Soybean, Livestock, and Renewable Natural Gas Production.”

CDI Executive Director Dien Judge said CDI will partner with 13 other entities to promote the environmental goals of Horizon II in Iowa. “In the months ahead, CDI will help communicate to districts and district commissioners the alternative ways landowners can take advantage of funding that may be made available by participating in the Horizon II conservation objectives,” Judge said. “There will be much more to share with commissioners as the project moves forward.”

Horizon II is an innovative program that compensates farmers in Iowa and Missouri for harvesting winter crops and prairie. This biomass, alongside manure and other agricultural or municipal waste, serves as a feedstock for anaerobic digesters to produce renewable energy. The program aims to advance a climate-smart agricultural system in the U.S., reducing greenhouse gas emissions from commodity production promoting year-round ground cover. and

“Partnerships” is the key, said RAE Development Manager Will Higgins. “Working with farmers and producers – building those relationships and building that trust – takes time,” said Higgins. “And so that’s where I view partnerships like with Iowa conservation district commissioners means working with people who have a network of producers who are trusted advisors and help get the conversation started.”

The initiative expands existing supply chains for renewable natural gas (RNG), biofertilizers, and carbon credits, while enhancing soil health, water quality, flood control, and wildlife habitat. “I think see the future of this renewable market as a three-part Venn diagram where you have energy production and conservation benefits – what we would typically call ecosystem services like clean air, cleaner water – and then wildlife habitat.”

The work is supported by the USDA Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities grant and led by RAE, whose core mission is to “develop a market-based solution that puts an economic value on restored native grasses, prairie plants, and winter-hardy cover crops using sustainably harvested biomass to create renewable natural gas.”

According to Higgins, the Horizon II project will improve carbon sequestration in the production of corn, soybean, pork, and beef commodities. Horizon II will also create new opportunities for small and underserved producers while benefiting soil health, clean water, flood control, and habitats for native wildlife. Partner organizations involved in the RAE Horizon II project are: Conservation Districts of Iowa, Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance, Iowa Soybean Association, Iowa State University, Missouri Prairie Foundation, Sievers Family Farms, Soil and Water Outcomes Fund, Smithfield Foods, The Nature Conservancy, University of Missouri, Verdesian, University of California-Davis, and Veterans in Agriculture.

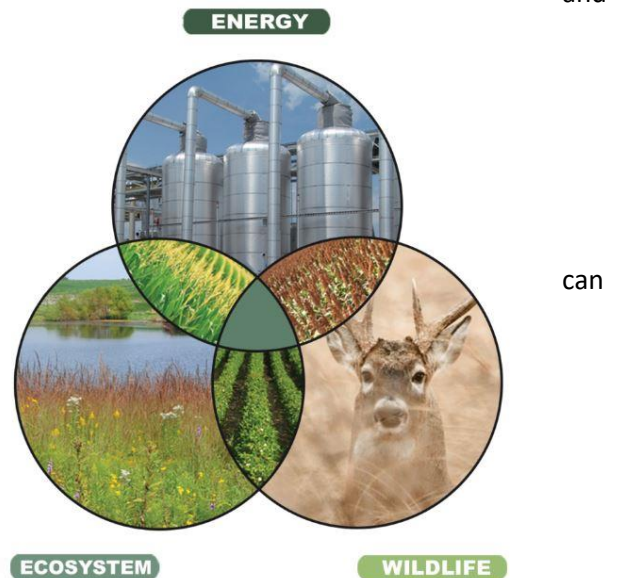


Illustration courtesy Roeslein Alternative Energy