

# ---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 2024  
Volume 5, Number 12

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### From: President Jeri Thornsberry

First of all, I am honored to serve another term as your CDI President and I look forward to working together with our new VP, Eric Wessels. We also had some changes in our Regional Directors and they had an opportunity to visit with their respective commissioners during a morning breakfast at conference. Please reach out to them with your questions, concerns, or improvement suggestions.

As you all know, November 5 is General Election Day where Iowans will be electing or re-electing commissioners. It's essential for the CDI Board to review the results and ensure both new and current commissioners are well-prepared. We have not developed the content for the upcoming Spring Regionals (February 25-27 and March 4-6) and I expect that some aspect of commissioner training will be a part of those meetings.

As a reminder, we commissioners are asked to participate in-person in only two consequential meetings during the year. One is your own Spring Regional and the other is the annual conference of the CDI Association. These meetings are an opportunity to focus on commissioner training, get briefed on new information, and share ideas and experiences with your fellow commissioners. Please make a note to attend on your calendars.

This coming year, I will convene the Bylaws Review Committee to review, refresh, add and/or modify some of the current bylaws. The 2025 annual meeting will afford a major opportunity for discussion and approval of proposed bylaw changes. It's important for all members to attend and voice their opinions. Annual Conference is scheduled for Monday, August 25 and Tuesday, August 26, 2025 at the Gateway Hotel and Conference Center in Ames.

Partnership Day at the Capitol scheduled for Tuesday, March 11 is a vital event for engaging with elected representatives. Despite the challenging scheduling, it remains an important occasion for advocacy. We will once again send out a packet that contains a sample invitation to send to your elected representatives, talking points and other helpful material.

The scale of conservation practices installed in 2024 is impressive. Our collective efforts represent a gift to future generations, each effort contributing to a legacy of our environmental stewardship. Profound thanks to each of you. And next year, we face another inflection point—a chance to leverage a substantial increase in unprecedented conservation funding—funding not seen since the Dust Bowl era. As soil and water commissioners, our role is pivotal in charting the future in soil and water conservation in Iowa. We are 500 strong and I am confident we will succeed.

Your leadership and dedication not only to conservation but also to county-wide service are commendable. Here's to a productive and impactful year ahead, and may your harvest indeed be bountiful and safe!

## Executive Director Report – Dien Judge

The leaves on the trees are beginning to change color, and the temperatures are cooling down. Combines are rolling over the fields all around Iowa as the harvest is underway. Summer has passed, and this fall we see a lot of progress being made on conservation projects around the state. When more conservation practices are adopted every year, and when more conservation programs are utilized by Iowa landowners, we see that as success.

Farmers, ranchers and landowners are learning more about the economic benefits of the adoption of conservation practices. This results in growth in the use of cover crops and prairie strips. It results in more interest in wetland restoration. It results in landowners making decisions to make soil health a priority in their long-range plans.

At CDI, we strive to help our district commissioners achieve success in their goals. Our mission is to inform, educate and lead Iowans through our local soil and water conservation districts to promote conservation of natural resources. Our organization exists to support the districts through public education, commissioner development and the promotion of conservation practices.

CDI works to amplify the voice of conservation commissioners by making the connection to lawmakers and policymakers at the state and federal levels. It's tremendously important to tell our story to those who make critical decisions about program funding and the rules governing conservation programs.

CDI organizes several major events throughout the year, bringing our commissioners together with our partner agencies. Our Spring Regional meetings will be held February 25, 26 and 27 as well as March 4, 5 and 6. That will be followed by the annual Conservation Partnership Day at the Iowa Capitol on Tuesday, March 11. We hope you're marking your calendars now for these important dates and making plans to attend. These events offer a great opportunity to learn, as well as make your voices heard.

With Envirothon, our CDI scholarships and the CDI Poster Contest, we work to educate Iowa youth about the importance of stewardship of the land and water, developing the conservationists of the future.

CDI also works directly with NRCS and other partner agencies in the form of cooperative agreements. CDI currently has three major agreements with NRCS that provide CDI employees to help get conservation projects done at the local level. Our Administrative Support program is providing 25 clerical staff members around the state to help get work done in the offices. Our Partnership for Private Lands program will provide 15 specialist positions to get work done out in the field. And our Conservation Planning program will continue to provide direct assistance for district commissioners to help update and maintain their comprehensive five-year conservation plans. There are job opportunities in these programs, and we're looking for qualified applicants. Please check <https://www.cdiowa.org/who-we-are/job-openings/> for more information about job opportunities with CDI.

# IOWA NATURE SUMMIT 2024

October 9-10th, 2024

Drake University Olmsted Center

**CDI is a co-sponsor of this important event.**

**For more information and to register: [www.iowanature.org](http://www.iowanature.org)**

## Daryl Nelson: 2024 Commissioner of the Year

### A multi-generational commitment to the land, to community

Something about working with – sometimes for – the Adair SWCD in Greenfield keeps bringing Daryl Nelson back for more. District Commissioner from 2005-2012 serving roles as Vice-Chair and Chair; returning in 2014 as Assistant Commissioner for five years including a stint as district employee working on CRP status and WQI cover crops; and once again returning as a Commissioner in 2020. Asked what a leading motivator is in his two decades with the Adair SWCD, the answer comes easy, in few words: “Well, it’s soil conservation and water quality,” he says. “That pretty well sums it up.”



*Daryl Nelson receiving “2024 Commissioner of the Year” award, with family (l-r) Daryl, Janna, Trevor, Chris during Annual Conference.*

For his long-time involvement in an array of roles, Daryl Nelson was

honored as the “2024 Commissioner of the Year” for the state of Iowa at the 78th Annual Soil and Water Conservation Commissioners Conference in August. According to his nomination presentation: “Daryl sets a great example as a commissioner on how to serve your community but also how to lead by example.” He is, conference attendees heard, “A jack-of-all-trades when it comes to serving as a commissioner.”

Daryl is known as a long-time advocate for cover crops, maximizing and going above and beyond the parameters of the WQI cover crops program each year. On his row-crop and cattle farm, he does no-till, crop rotation, terraces, waterways and prescribed grazing.

That commitment to conservation practices came early, he says. “My family moved to Adair County in 1960 when I was seven years old, and we moved from the flat wetland areas of Calhoun County down here to Adair County so my parents could own their own farm and raise cattle.” The family settled into a 120-acre farm, with “a decent house on it.” There was something else. “This farm was ripped with gullies that’s all just grass that had been farmed pretty hard,” remembers Daryl. “Our folks contacted the Soil Conservation Service, and they helped build a pond, fill in the gullies and made a watering system out of the pond because we were short on water, too. I had the importance of bringing the land back and sustaining that ingrained into me at a young age.”

Meeting his wife, Janna, in Community College, Daryle started helping her parents with their farm (where the Daryl and Janna live today, celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary this month!). “It had similar deep ravines, 15-20 feet deep, cut where there should have been waterways.”

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Again, SCS worked to help design a pond – at the time, the largest in Adair County. “And it worked really well because over the years, primarily before we adopted no-till 30 or so years ago, there was a lot of erosion, and the pond silted basically full. That's a lot of runoff.”

That near lifelong devotion to a land ethic leads Daryl today to take a long-term view of farming practices and sustainability, he says. “You think back about how a hundred years ago buffalo and passenger pigeons were plentiful and how people were not even thinking about potential extinction of species. And I almost wonder if what we're doing with our soil now, the way we're farming, what things will look like in a hundred years. How long are people going to need to farm before long-term sustainability is common?”

*Of his time with the Adair SWCD:*

**“The best part is the friends you make with other commissioners and ... the professional people in the office. It's a privilege to be able to associate with them.”**

**-Daryl Nelson**

Practicing no-till for three decades, cover crops for nearly two decades, Daryl Nelson is now semi-retired from managing row crops but has convinced the next generation to continue. “I have to give our son Chris and his wife Sarah credit for being willing to buy into cover crops because it's an expense, but we've seen our yields increase dramatically. So there's a payback here. You can just see a lot of these fields get yellow spots and pockets, but you don't see that when you're doing cover crops. They look just even and green. You can see the difference.” Though concerned about the future, he's still optimistic. He's encouraged that in Iowa, prairie strips are taking off, programs like the [Iowa Soil and Water Outcomes Fund](#) – supported by IDALS – gains traction, 566PL structures are getting more notice. “And we're seeing cover crops increase my leaps and bounds.”



*Nelson helps coordinate bringing the Adair SWCD drill, available for rent, to producers for CRP seeding.*

Adair SWCD offers drill, roller, crimper, terrace seeder, and a pendulum spreader, with Daryl as drill coordinator, managing equipment rentals for the district that help with CRP seeding.

Working with – and sometimes for – Adair SWCD and the community of Greenfield (where he actively worked in cleanup efforts this summer after the tornado strike) has a welcome personal benefit, he says. “The best part of it is just the friends you make with the other commissioners and catching up on what's going on all around the neighborhood. And the other thing is, the professional people that are in the office. It's a real privilege to be able to associate with them.”

## Planning for your next Field Day

### *What do producers want to know – what’s the best way to demonstrate?*

As a sign above every entrepreneur and dedicated conservationist door might say: “There’s no such thing as failure. Only learning experiences.” So Michael James’ perfect plan to sponsor a field day where farmers would line up to get their signature on official cover crop assistance applications was a true ... learning experience. “Basically, I invited probably six or seven different vendors so that they could all be here and they could all talk to farmers,” says James, Watershed Coordinator for Polk SWCD. After the field day demonstration outside, James had everything ready inside: “I had the ability for a farmer to actually walk into the NRCS office, sign up for their cover crop assistance, talk to somebody that could actually provide them with seed and then walk to the next table and have someone that would provide them with the ability to apply it. I had a group here with a cover crop seeding plan. I had an insurance company here because they could get a discount off on their insurance.”

The outcome of that perfect planning? “It crashed and burned so badly,” he says. “I had everybody here, but nobody walked into the office to sign up to do something.” The valuable learning experience on this day, James says: timing is everything, and promotion is key.

“Farmers will do what they want. I realized the timing of what they do and how they do it is based on *their* timing, not mine. I think it was a good idea, but it just didn’t work. I think I may not have had enough promotion and what I realized was that promotion is absolutely essential to this whole thing. Getting the message out A) multiple times, and B) through multiple channels is critical because each channel has a certain reach.”



*Polk SWCD Watershed Coordinator Michael James leading a “Biology for Soil Health” field day in August.*

Before and for long after, Michael James has helped plan, organize and sponsor [successful, popular field days](#). “The *topic* is the most important thing,” he says. “Having a topic that somebody can relate to that’s most accessible to the largest number of farmers, and that has some depth to it. What that means is, number one – what are farmers concerned about, what are they interested in? And number two – how much depth can I put into the field day. There’s a simple aspect to it: there’s a medium aspect of it, and then there’s the deep aspect – having something that’s accessible that everyone can understand and the ability to go into it deeper.” That added depth means having more fire power available, either from farmers who have successful experience with the topic, or invite expertise from universities, researchers and technical people. Next is setting dates. Time of year is fairly clear, says James. “Farmers tend not to want to go to field days during planting or around those times that they’re harvesting. Middle of the summer works, even the middle of the winter works pretty well.”

Once a topic is chosen, dates set and presenters in place, the next critical step is getting the word out. Speaking of his “learning experience” with the disappointing cover crops event: “What I realized was that promotion is key to this whole thing and getting the message out multiple times, through multiple channels, is critical because each channel has a certain reach to it.”

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James urges districts who are making plans for a field day explore as many different channels of communication possible to promote an event. “The more, the better. The other thing is just repeat the message over and over again, because it may register one day but not get down on the receiver’s calendar until the second or third message comes through, and then they go, ‘Oh, yeah, I want to do that!’”

“The channels that I have tapped into are organizations that really communicate well with farmers and that farmers like to get information from.” He cited PFI, Iowa State University and affiliate Iowa Learning Farms, or Farmer’s Union. These groups and those similar may very well help distribute field day promotional information to their stakeholders. Facebook has a place in promotion, but connecting with outside Facebook individuals and entities is difficult.

Securing email lists can be a challenge. Some entities will share an email list, and those who don’t may still be willing to distribute information to their stakeholders. Flyers and electronic contacts with USDA service centers, NRCS CAs and DCs, and Extension offices also may help spread the word. FSA has a large database of producer email usually available to districts, but James notes response can be limited; still, even the smaller return may be worth trying.

**For more information, Michael James recommends a list of suggestions from the National Wildlife Association. “It’s a project called [Grow More](#), and they basically have training that works with Watershed Coordinators or whomever to figure out the best ways to reach out, especially to producers.” Find that comprehensive list of suggestions here:**

**“Field Days How-To”**

And finally: sponsors! “What was new to me was actually asking vendors for dollars for field days,” says James. “And the reason that it’s necessary is because there are certain things that I can’t fund through my programs. For example, food. I can’t fund snacks, foods or drinks. So what I’ve done is I’ve asked for vendors

to show up, who have the ability to show what their products are, and then ask them for funding for that. Agricultural professionals are really shy about asking them for dollars. But what I have found is that it’s really a benefit to those vendors to have access to a room of 80 farmers and landowners because they also struggle to reach those landowners.” James said the nominal fee he asks is \$200-\$250 for the sponsoring vendor to be at the event. “That’s reasonable and it really does benefit them, so you shouldn’t be shy about asking. If you can find vendors that are aligned with the messaging that you have in the project, they’re 100% willing to spend a little bit of money for the access to those farmers.”

***Horizon II film project reaches CDI***

***CDI Executive Director Judge interviewed for online video series***

A film crew from Roeslein Alternative Energy (RAE), as a sub-grantee of Horizon II – arranged a film interview with CDI Executive Director Dien Judge this month, which will be included in season two of the online “[Prairie Prophets](#)” video series. CDI has joined 13 other entities to promote the environmental goals of Horizon II in Iowa. During the approximately half-hour interview, Judge gave an overview of CDI’s goals to help promote the work of SWCDs in Iowa. When asked, “What can farmers here in Iowa do to be part of a solution?”, Judge said: “The first step for any farmer is to go into their local Natural Resource Conservation Service office and get connected with their district conservationists and their local Soil and Water Conservation District commissioners. Those are their neighbors.”



*Executive Director Judge during film project interview.*