----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.



October 2024 Volume 6, Number 1

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From: President Jeri Thornsberry

By the time you read this, harvest will be nearly complete, and many of you either will be starting to plant your cover crops or noticing those planted previously are already at work!

As another growing season comes to a close, we've faced challenges ranging from too much rain to drought conditions. Each day brings new obstacles, pushing us to adapt our farm management practices in response to changing weather patterns. Our resilience in farming is rooted in our commitment to conservation practices.

Speaking of conservation, I want to commend every commissioner in Iowa for the significant number of conservation contracts processed in FY 2024. I was truly impressed by the accomplishments in my county, Black Hawk. We processed 26 new EQIP contracts valued at over \$1.4 million, along with six new CSP contracts worth over \$224,000, and an additional six RCPP'S valued at \$982,000. In total, we processed 104 CRP applications and developed 84 new conservation plans covering 13,584 acres. We now have nearly 28,000 acres planted with cover crops—11% of our total farmable acres. Our state cost share exceeded \$289,000, and we implemented 58 new practices.

I share these details not to boast; many counties achieved even greater results. Instead, I encourage each of you to ask your District Conservationist to highlight your county's accomplishments. I believe you will be as pleasantly surprised, as I was.

We faced a significant challenge in obligating our allocated funds from the Inflation Reduction Act, and we rose to the occasion. Take a moment to celebrate this achievement! Next year, we will have even more resources at our disposal, presenting a unique opportunity to implement extensive conservation measures before this extraordinary funding expires. Given the extreme weather events that lowa has encountered, it's even more crucial to protect our land from erosion and enhance our water quality with even more conservation practices.

Shortly both our partners, NRCS and IDALS, will release their ending fiscal year statistical reports highlighting our collective accomplishments for federal and state funding. I anticipate these combined statewide numbers will be exceptional.

We have much to be proud of, and even more to accomplish.

Thank you all for your hard work and dedication.

Executive Director Report – Dien Judge

Here at CDI we've been busy throughout the last month conducting job interviews to fill positions in our three major programs.

Our two Conservation Planning Coordinators will be working directly with Soil & Water Conservation Commissions throughout the state to assist with updating each commission's five-year conservation plan. We want to welcome our newly hired Planning Coordinator Regan Davis, who will be joining longtime CDI Planning Coordinator Madison Conley on our team. Over the course of the next five years, these planning professionals will be coming to meet with you in person to assist with your planning process. We hope you enjoy working with them to achieve the goal of keeping all of lowa's conservation plans up-to-date. (See more pages 5-6)

Another new program we're launching is an expansion of CDI's Partnership for Private Lands. When all of these positions are filled, CDI will employ five Wetland Easement Specialists, five Land & Water Conservationists and five Wetland Engineering Technicians to work all around the state to help get conservation projects completed. This program is an answer to the urgent need for more technical assistance in NRCS offices in all parts of the state.

Lastly, CDI's Administrative Support program is providing 25 clerical staff members around the state to help get work done in the offices. This program provides one administrative support specialist to help with office paperwork in all 25 of the NRCS Resource Team areas around the state. These CDI Administrative Support Specialists have proven to be very helpful in covering the office workload. Over the course of the last year, we've worked to keep all 25 of these positions filled.

It's not easy to find applicants for these positions in today's labor market, but we've been very pleased with the excellent group of folks who have joined the team at CDI. These dedicated employees are helping to get conservation projects completed, and that's what it's all about.

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 (see below).

District Job Opportunities:

Conservation Wetland Specialist – Thompson, IA_Fall 2024 Land and Water Conservationist – Estherville, IA_Fall 2024 Land and Water Conservationist -- Corning , IA_Fall 2024 Wetland Engineering Technician – Atlantic, IA_Fall 2024 Wetland Engineering Technician – Fairfield, IA_Fall 2024 Wetland Engineering Technician – Northwood, IA_Fall 2024 Wetland Engineering Technician – Spirit Lake, IA_Fall 2024 Wetland Engineering Technician – Charles City, IA_Fall 2024

Ida SWCD "Feed the Farmer" program

From the tractor seat, farmers see a familiar friend on the dusty road ... sack lunch in hand

For the men and women in the last weeks of another lowa harvest season who can be found in the fields, working the land to help feed the world – maybe devote some time to show gratitude? "We just show up at their combine, tractor or semi with lunch!", says Ida SWCD Conservation Assistant Barbara Knudsen. "The look of appreciation and the thanks is worth everything."

This month, Ida SWCD and partners devoted two days to serving up surprise sack lunches to every farmer or farmer friend they could find in the field or at work for its third annual "Feed the Farmer" program. It's a day that brings together logistical planning, county road maps, group huddles around a table prepping meals ... and kids with crayons.

For Ida Commissioner Roger Bumann, "Feed the Farmer" is a chance to thank local producers with an unexpected act of appreciation by offering them a lunch break while they're hard at work. "It's really gone over well," says Bumann. "The farmers really appreciate it. One of the ladies delivering said she had a guy with tears in his eyes when she delivered the sack. He just couldn't believe what we were out there doing. We've had a lot of good comments on this." The special day brings together the Ida SWCD and partners from Farm Bureau – which originated the local event – and local staff from FSA and NRCS.

This is the second year partnering with Farm Bureau. With his role as district commissioner, Bumann also serves with both NRCS and Farm Bureau boards. "That's how it started. Farm Bureau agents have been doing this for a few years, and our district just thought, 'Let's partner with somebody, work together on this. That way our district name is out in the community, and they'll know what we're doing and how we're helping the community out.'"

Ida CA Barbara Knudsen counts on those partners to help her plan, prepare and deliver 200 sack lunches around the county (the Ida County road map divided in half, then in quarters of each half assigned to deliverers). The brown paper bags get filled with slider buns packed with



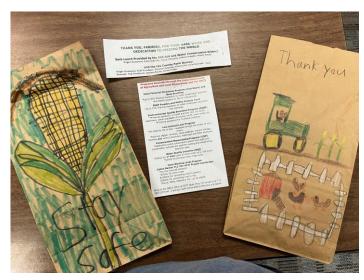


(Top) Making the sandwiches, Commissioner Roger Bumann seated; (bottom) filling lunch sacks. Teams from Ida SWCD, Farm Bureau, NRCS and FSA all helping. (All photos courtesdy Ida SWCD.)

meat and cheese sandwiches, and more. "We bag up all the non-perishable items the afternoon before the day we are delivering," she says. "The next morning, we meet and put together the sandwiches, add the cheese sticks, staple on any information we want the producers to see, load up and deliver to the fields and sometimes to the ethanol plant."

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Local Ida County kids decorate the sacks ... with district cost share programs and partner contact information included.

But it's what's on the outside of those sacks that adds an additional smile. "Brown paper bags are given to the elementary school for the students to design," she says, the idea of Farm Bureau Outreach Coordinator Danika Hinkeldey. "Danika is the 'Ag in the Classroom Coordinator' for Ida County. The kids enjoy it and so do the farmers. One bag this year had a police car chasing down a combine with the slogan, "STOP, you need to eat lunch!" I can't get over how good these drawings are. This year the 1st, 2nd and 4th graders decorated the bags."

The paper lunch sacks offer not just food, not just fun design from local kids – it also can serve as an excellent way to share information to producers about district program offerings. "We staple that

right on the sack on the outside of the bag so they see it before they open it," Knudson explains. "We do get phone calls, sometimes the same day or after harvest with interest in one of our programs because they read it on the attached paper. Windbreaks, cover crops and hay planting have been some of the biggest ones we

get asked about cost share."

The two days of delivery to the field mean a lot of road miles but Knudson says, that's fine. "It's nice to get out of the office and get to the field. One gets to see the great work that has been accomplished, and with the heavy rains this year we can see we still have work to do out there. And greeting the producers somewhere other than an office setting is nice."





(Left) Farmer and Ida SWCD Commissioner Kyle McBride takes time-out for a fresh-made sack lunch; happy son and mother farmers Judd Thomson and Carol Thomson.

A successful "Feed the Farmer" program depends on those local partnerships, says Knudson. "Partners are important because they help defray costs and make quick work preparing things – many hands make light work and happy hearts! We all have an interest in agriculture, and we work together for the good of our producers."

CDI and NRCS announce new agreement

Planner Agreement emphasizes updating current SWRCPs, renewed focus on Local Working Groups

CDI and the NRCS have entered into a new five-year grant that aims to rejuvenate the *Soil & Water Resource Conservation Plan (SWRCP)* project, already established in each of the districts in Iowa. CDI Planner Madison Conley, who for three years has facilitated districts in executing their plans and who will continue her role, said the new agreement will update existing SWRCPs and emphasize community engagement.

"We as planning coordinators have taken each district through a planning process that ranged from around six to seven months, that included two public meetings," Conley said. "And with that we helped develop the contents of each five-year SWRCP, especially those five priority goals that include actions, timeframes, and milestones. With this new grant the NRCS is allowing CDI planning coordinators to continue to support that approved five-year plan and update all the data based on the new 2022 Agricultural Census and the 2023 US Population Census."

Additionally, Conley noted a new planning coordinator – Regan Davis -- recently joined CDI "to continue the great work that our previous planning coordinators, Alyssa Comer and Claire Carlson have done in the past." (See story p. 6) "Regan will be taking on the Northwest region as well as the Southwest region of the state. Primarily, I will now be working in the Northeast region and the Southeast region of the state with a couple of districts in the Northwest that I've worked with in the past."

With this new grant, Conley said the planning process will focus on each district's Local Working Group (LWG), helping to enhance engagement with each SWCD with the goal of keeping an interested local public engaged with conservation district priorities.

"The aim is to gather new input locally," said Conley. "Most districts are keeping touch with their community with events and Field Days. "We hope that they have continued to utilize their Local Working Group throughout the previous years. This planning process will provide the SWCDs an additional opportunity to get them together. Their input will guide us as we tweak the district's existing SWRCP to where the district aims to head in the future – such as updating those goals, timeframes, and milestones. And I'm here to help do that! I'm here to take on most of the effort for this, like I've done previously and successfully in the past. I'm here to do it again."

The new grant started in October, and planning coordinators will be reaching out to the first round of districts with whom they'll begin facilitating five-year plan updates.

"I like to let the districts know the planning process that Regan and I will be working to move forward is different this time. This is not starting from scratch. So this is not going to be nearly as robust as the original planning process was. Depending on how quickly districts want to move, their main responsibility will be to get their Local Working Group together and we will do the rest. Regan and I will facilitate the Local Working Group meeting, we'll include what updates to goals districts choose and get all the data in their plan updated. The district will review, we'll coordinate state approval, get signatures and we're done!"

Planner Profile

Regan Davis, CDI Planner for Western Iowa



Northwest and Southwest CDI Planner Regan Davis

In her recent career search, Regan Davis hoped there could be a way to combine her passions for conservation and for meeting new people. Regan believes at CDI, she's found the way to make that happen as the new CDI Planner for Western Iowa districts. "In all my job searching I was mainly focusing on a lot of county conservation openings," says Regan. "When I explored 'Conservation Districts of Iowa', it just ticked off all the marks that I wanted." With a 2023 animal ecology degree from Iowa State University, Regan Davis will be responsible for meeting her new role helping districts update their five-year Soil & Water Resource Conservation Plan (SWRCP).

"I was an educator with Science Center of Iowa and also at the Blank Park Zoo," she says. "I was really interested in doing more education work. I like talking with people, I love getting people connected with nature. CDI was a great way for me to maintain that kind of personal connection to the community." In the next few weeks and months, Regan will be introducing herself to

Western lowa districts and the goals of CDI's new Planner agreement with NRCS, which became active in October. Her position gives her the chance to become more familiar with parts of the state, she says, as she develops professional relationships with Commissioners and District Conservationists and Conservation Assistants. "I'm hoping I have really positive professional relationships being made, and that we can all come together to achieve a singular goal in terms of future environmental conservation. I'm looking forward to gaining a better understanding as to how each part of lowa operates in terms of conservation work. I know everyone does it a little bit differently, and that's why there are unique five-year plans for each district. As CDI Planner, my goal is understanding all of them better and how all of it can come together to benefit lowa as a whole."

CDI co-sponsor: Iowa Nature Summit

Gathering brings together varied groups, but all devoted to protecting nature's gifts in Iowa

In a closing chapter of his 2023 book "The River Knows: How Water and Land Will Shape Our Future"— Neil Hamilton proposed "The Big Idea" in response to the number of "individuals and organizations working to improve" lowa's land and water, yet "given their scale and energy it is surprising how slow our progress and how demoralized how many people feel."

The Big Idea: "What might be possible if we bring all the elements of lowa's nature, individuals and organizations

alike, together in an Iowa Nature Summit'?"

After the second successful "<u>lowa Nature Summit</u>" held at Drake this month, Hamilton reflected on the initial response to the Big Idea: "Some people said, 'Well, all that's going to be is getting the choir together.' My response was, 'When was the last time we ever had the choir together? There's all this energy and all these organizations, but when it comes to policy, we're kind of on our back heel. Why don't we get everybody together and try to have a meeting and talk about our shared values and what we can do?"



Neil Hamilton addresses guests – more than 200 in attendance – during the Iowa Nature Summit on the campus of Drake University.



Organizations attending the two-day event all share a common goal of protecting and preserving lowa's natural environments, including promoting new and better public policies.

In what he calls "a labor of love", Hamilton noted this October two-day event had more than 200 guests, 40 organizational sponsors including CDI, and more than 30 speakers. "I'd never been to a meeting like this where you had all of those groups coming together around their shared interest in nature. That's what's unique about the Summit." Panel discussions addressed an engaged audience on a wide range of topics, but all focused on "preserving and protecting nature's diversity". (See special report, p. 9)

Neil Hamilton is the Former Director of the Drake Agricultural Law Center, Professor Emeritus of Law at Drake University, a published author, and also a Commissioner with the Dallas SWCD. As he considered themes of this recent Iowa Nature Summit,

he offered three specific issues and concerns that fellow lowa district commissioners might do well to explore and engage locally:

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Testing Private Wells

"We had that long session about concerns for the relationship between nature and public health. There are concerns in lowa about cancer and what may be causing it. One of the things I think we need to think more about is the issue of testing private wells for water quality and for nitrates. In the context of the Dallas County SWCD, a year and a half ago that issue came onto our radar and the county's offer of free testing for private wells. We as a district spread the word about that. It's available in all counties. County sanitation folks will do private well testing. We as conservation districts

can publicize that and make sure people know they can get their wells tested, there's funding. If problems are discovered, they can mediate them. So that's something that water conservation districts can do that helps address some of the concerns people may have about health, and the question: is it in the water?"

Nature-based Education

"One of the big takeaways I had from the very first summit was when I learned about the "School of the Wild" program, run by the University of Iowa College of Education. They're trying to take that program statewide, including their work with local cooperators and using local experts to help provide the information. There are opportunities there for soil and water conservation districts and soil and water conservation staff to work with the School of the Wild or with other educators. That idea of helping your school districts create or recreate a prairie, creating an outdoor classroom where students can learn about nature, learn about soil erosion -- a place where a soil and water conservation district can help educate children. I think that's a real opportunity as well."

Non-Traditional Funding

"One of the sessions was on being able to obtain unique funding. Our conservation districts are fairly expert at using NRCS funding and the traditional programs of EQIP and CRP." Yet Hamilton noted one Summit speaker from Polk County reported more than 30 unique sources of funding that Polk has been able to access at one point or another. "That idea of





Iowa Nature Summit guests take a break from informative discussions to visit sponsor displays, making new connections.

thinking creatively about funding sources that are there and learning from other people who have used them – there's more that counties can do. There's a tranche of REAP funds that come to every soil and water conservation district. Some of them are key to prairie restoration or forest or wildlife habitat. When I joined the Soil & Water Conservation Commission in Dallas County, we weren't using most of our REAP funds. We were turning funds back in because we hadn't actually found anybody to use them – and we hadn't found anybody to use those REAP funds largely because we hadn't told anybody they were available! So whether it's helping somebody put a prairie in their backyard or it's helping the local school district put in an educational prairie, I think it's hard for districts to argue that we need more funding if we aren't using the funding that we have.

Special to CDI Connections: Iowa Nature Summit overview

Opportunity for district networking, sharing our mission

By Mary Ellen Miller

Wayne County SWCD Commissioner/CDI Board Secretary

This fall presented several opportunities for SWCD Commissioners to broaden our perspectives and expand our networks with others who are working to steward our land, protect our waters and champion conservation. On October 9-10, Drake University hosted the second Iowa Nature Summit, a project of the Drake Agricultural Law Center.

The conference planners Joe McGovern, Pat Boddy, Christine Curry, Jennifer Zwagerman and Ryan Smith led by Neil Hamilton assembled an excellent roster of speakers to take a deeper dive into critical issues of how nature relates to public health.

The goal of convening the Summit was to create a forum for citizens across lowa to learn about new opportunities, celebrate what is being done and to strategize about advocating for a more hopeful and healthy future for lowa nature.

"Nature and Public Health" and "Farming, Soil Health, Food and Wellness" discussions led the opening day program followed by insights into "Creative Use of Public Programs to Protect Land and Enhance Nature." Iowa's cancer rate is the second highest in the nation and the fastest growing. Connections are evident of the correlations with our polluted landscape.



As one of the Iowa Nature Summit organizational sponsors, CDI shared the fun and rewards of the annual CDI Poster Contest in a colorful display, including the latest state contest winners.

The afternoon session introduced "New Voices for Iowa Nature and the Environment" and finished with a look at "Empowering Youth Activism Through Art." As we experience a generational leadership shift in organizations working to protect Iowa's environment, these speakers gave me hope that there are younger people interested in our work as SWCD Commissioners to protect our land and waters.

Day Two began with an opportunity to hear from four state legislators about "Policy Opportunities for Nature in the 2025 Legislature", followed by a look at "Nature Based Education: Iowa Innovations." Considering the challenges we face recruiting new talent to our local county NRCS offices, I was particularly interested in learning about "Internships as Pathways to Nature Careers."

"Iowa Nature Champion Awards" were given out during the luncheon. Winners included Mike

Delaney for his work protecting the Raccoon River, Liz Garst for her ongoing work with Whiterock Conservancy crop ground easements, Neil Hamilton for initiating these Nature Summits and writing "The Land Remains" and "The River Knows" to give voice to the land and the river, my long-time friends Jan & Tom Lovell for permanently protecting a stretch of undeveloped land on the Clear Lake shoreline, and John Pearson for his 40-year career as an ecologist with the lowa DNR educating about the value of lowa's wild places, big and small.

CDI, along with over 45 other groups, had a great table display featuring our Poster Contest winners (see photo). A great benefit of attending this summit was to learn more about individual organizations that share our mission and to network with a large group of conservation enthusiasts, nearly 200 attended. I urge each and every SWCD Commissioner to consider attending next year's lowa Nature Summit; it has become a not-to-miss event!

Planning to Practices—Placed-Based Planning with ISA

Iowa Soybean Association is a firm believer in *place-based planning* to ensure that priority resources are identified with actionable plans crafted to meet the unique needs of the resource. By protecting *locally prioritized resources*, community interest drives the project momentum to completion.

Leverage recent district-wide resource plans to prioritize the protection of local water resources – a source water reservoir, fishing or recreational lake, or sediment-impaired waterway - through the development of *targeted*, *actionable watershed plans*. Designed to quantify practice



benefits, targeted watershed plans are crafted with the goal of seeing practices on the ground. Each plan will be tailored to the district's needs and could include:

- · The evaluation of existing practices,
- · The identification of feasible conservation and best management practices,
- · The estimated benefits of feasible conservation and best management practices,
- · General outreach materials for the community, or
- · Farm scale outreach plans.

For more information on how place-based plans have been crafted across Iowa, contact Rob Davis, Watershed Program Manager at Iowa Soybean Association, at 515-334-1079 or rdavis@iasoybeans.com. Iowa Soybean Association is a valued sponsor of CDI.

Horizon II Annual Meeting

In "All Hands On Deck" session, partners review goals and responsibilities for pilot project in 2025

Participating partners of the 'Horizon II' pilot project gathered in St. Louis this month – in-person and virtually, including CDI – for the 2024 Annual Meeting at the headquarters of Roeslein Alternative Energy (RAE), sponsor of Horizon II. Speakers and presenters focused on current planning as the project roles out, technical and economic issues, and coordination among partners. Producer incentives, the role of partners, a look at voluntary markets for prairie and cover crops, and biofertilizer/nutrient recovery were among featured topics. CDI has joined 13 other entities to promote the environmental goals of Horizon II in Iowa. The pilot project works to demonstrate how farmers can earn environmental credit compensation and renewable energy revenue by planting prairie grasses and cover crops, funded by an \$80 million grant from the federal government's USDA "Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities" program, secured by RAE.

2024 Regional CDI Poster Contest Winners

Bold face = Regional and State Winner

Region 1

- Division 1 Ella Huisman -- Sioux Center Christian Sioux SWCD
- Division 2 Devi Rose De Groot Central Lyon Elementary Lyon SWCD
- Division 3 Ella Boonstra Hull Protestant Reformed Christian Sioux SWCD
- Division 4 Carly Brummel Hull Protestant Reformed Christian Sioux SWCD
- Division 5 Kiann Blomgren West Lyon High Lyon Co.

Region 2

- Division 1 Roman Eisenbacher West Elementary, Emmetsburg Palo Alto SWCD
- Division 2 Jackson Saunders Sioux Central Community Buena Vista SWCD
- Division 3 Meghan Van Drunen Iowa Great Lakes Lutheran Clay SWCD

Region 3

Division 2 – Joey Murra – Great Acres Academy – Winnebago SWCD

Region 4

- Division 1 Myah Marass Valley Lutheran Blackhawk SWCD
- Division 2 Easton Skinner Olin Elementary Jones SWCD
- Division 3 Rea Renner Sacred Heart Jackson SWCD
- Division 4 Adrianna Ames Anamosa Middle School, Olin Jones SWCD
- Division 5 Jensen Trotter Valley Lutheran Blackhawk SWCD

Region 5

- Division 1 Zeke Hernandez Guthrie Center Guthrie SWCD
- Division 2 Bristol Bates CAM Elementary, Massena Cass SWCD
- Division 3 Chen Gao AHSTW Community Schools, Avoca East Pott SWCD

Region 7

- Division 2 Alexa Rocha-Ayala South Tama County Tama SWCD
- Division 3 Elizabeth Arnold Norway Intermediate Benton SWCD
- Division 4 Joelle Rivera Benton Middle Community School– Benton SWCD

Region 8

- Division 1 Grayson Granfield Diagonal School Ringgold SWCD
- Division 2 Stella Christensen Shenandoah K8 Page SWCD
- Division 3 Levi Whittington Diagonal School Ringgold SWCD
- Division 4 Hailey Grandfield Diagonal School Ringgold SWCD
- Division 5 Bailey Dittmer Central Decatur High Decatur SWCD

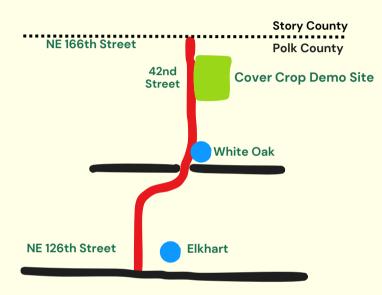
Region 9

- Division 1 Adelaide Danks Burlington Notre Dame Des Moines SWCD
- Division 2 Kayan Patel Lee SWCD
- Division 3 Ella Joyce Burlington Notre Dame Des Moines SWCD
- Division 4 Peityn Claypool English Valleys Keokuk SWCD
- Division 5 Imigyn Stratton English Valleys Keokuk SWCD

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Site Mar



Additional Cover Crop info

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	Field 1	Field 2	Field 3	Field 4	Field 5	Field 6	Field 7	Field 8	
	EAST								Ø
NORTH	Rye, Vetch, Radish, Camelina	Triticale	Rye	Oats, Mustard	Radish, Turnip, Rapeseed, Oats	Winter Wheat	Vetch	Oats	souтн Entrance Park Here
WEST									0
	Field 1	Field 2	Field 3	Field 4	Field 5	Field 6	Field 7	Field 8	Field

Sponsors:





