

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

Happy Solstice! As the days lengthen, we're one step closer to the promise of Spring, and with it, new opportunities to strengthen our mission. On behalf of the CDI leadership team, I extend a warm welcome to our newly elected commissioners. As you prepare to take the Oath of Office in January, I want to thank you for stepping into a role that carries the legacy of all those who have served before you. Your commitment to advancing our conservation mission is both inspiring and essential.

A special thank you is owed to those commissioners who have served with distinction and are now retiring. Your collective efforts to protect our soil and improve our water quality have shaped the future of your districts and this organization. We deeply appreciate your service and the invaluable knowledge you leave behind. As many districts celebrate their 80th anniversaries this year, this is a wonderful time to reconnect with past commissioners. Just imagine the stories and wisdom they could share!

Also a time for mentorship and learning emerges during the January organizational meeting. After the swearing-in ceremony, seasoned commissioners can take the opportunity to mentor their newly elected colleagues. Do you remember the first time you navigated the office organizational structure or tried to understand the acronyms we so often use? The learning curve can feel steep, but a few moments of guidance can help ease that transition for our new commissioners. Together, we can ensure that all commissioners—new and current—are equipped to serve effectively. Towards that end, CDI will host a **Commissioner Orientation** session, offering a comprehensive overview of our roles and responsibilities under state law. Details will be shared soon, so stay tuned!

As we reflect on the progress of 2024, my gratitude for our collective accomplishments runs deep. Thanks to the current Administration's funding, we've made significant strides in our conservation efforts, working to stay ahead of the increasingly – **Continued on Page 2**

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severe weather events that threaten our communities and environment. Yet, despite these gains, the need for continued action remains.

As we move into 2025, the sense of urgency and passion for conservation that has fueled this work continues to guide us. Together, we have made a real difference, but the challenges ahead will require even more dedication, collaboration, and vision.

2025 holds incredible potential for all of us. It is a time of reflection, renewal, and optimism. As we embark on this new chapter, I encourage you to keep your focus on the bigger picture: the long-term health of our soil and water resources. Here's to another year of impactful leadership and progress in conservation. Together, we can continue to protect and preserve our natural resources for generations to come.

*May the blessings of this season stay with you and yours throughout the year.
Happy New Year!*

Executive Director Report – Dien Judge

With 2024 coming to an end, it's a good time to reflect on the accomplishments of the past year and to evaluate what has been successful as well as areas in need of improvement. We're proud of our accomplishments at CDI over the past year, and we look forward to continuing to provide a valuable service to all members of this organization.

One of the key roles of this organization is to serve as the collective voice of all 500 locally elected Soil & Water Conservation District Commissioners. By speaking with a unified voice, CDI amplifies the impact of local efforts across Iowa, ensuring that the priorities of soil & water conservation are heard in the halls of the Iowa Legislature and in the halls of Congress in Washington, D.C. We make it a priority to work directly with our elected officials to make sure they understand the conservation needs and concerns of landowners in rural and urban areas. CDI also works in collaboration with key partners. CDI is an affiliate of the National Association of Conservation Districts, which gives it a broader platform to advocate for federal conservation programs and policies that benefit you in the local district.

CDI also supports the next generation of conservationists through its scholarship programs for local youth. At the state level, these scholarships encourage young people to pursue careers in agriculture, conservation, and environmental science. At the national level, CDI participates in the NACD Poster Contest. These educational efforts help to build our future leaders who will continue to advocate for soil & water conservation in Iowa and beyond.

CDI also provides direct support at the local level through our cooperative agreements with NRCS. Through these agreements, CDI has provided 25 Administrative Support Specialists who are working in every district in Iowa, helping to ease the workload and make our NRCS processes run smoothly. We also employ Wetland Easement Specialists, Land & Water Conservationists and Wetland Engineering Technicians to help provide critical technical assistance to make conservation projects become reality.

CDI continues to fill important positions in our three programs. If you or any of your partners know of someone looking to work in the field of soil and water conservation, please send them our way. 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.

Third NRCS DC in 81 Years Set to Retire in Keokuk County

by Jason Johnson, State Public Affairs Specialist, USDA-NRCS, Des Moines, Iowa

When Larry Stevens retires as a District Conservationist (DC) for USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) at the end of 2024, it will end the tenure of only the third Keokuk County DC in 81 years.

Since 1994, Stevens has been the voice of conservation for NRCS in Sigourney. Driving through the rural southern Iowa county this fall, his legacy – and those who served before him – can be seen as cattle graze green pastures, while farm ponds, terraces, and native grasses line the rolling landscape.



Keokuk County’s Conservation Legacy

Keokuk County has a conservation legacy that includes state conservation board members, statewide conservation award winners, and soil and water conservation district (SWCD) commissioners who have been re-elected for decades. “It’s good to have commissioners who are using the practices that you’re trying to get others to implement,” said Don Borts, DC for NRCS in Sigourney from 1970 to 1994.

Before Borts, George Thorburn was the county’s first DC, with a 26-year run from 1943 to 1970.

Thorburn passed away in 1991.

The Keokuk County conservation legacy includes current NRCS Chief Terry

Keokuk County farmer Donald Millikin (middle) with NRCS District Conservationist Larry Stevens (left) and his predecessor, Don Borts (right), with his cow/calf herd on his pasture. Millikin has worked with Stevens for 30 years and, before that, Borts for 24 years.

Cosby, who was a student trainee under Borts’ tutelage in the early 1980s. Cosby went on to work for Borts as a soil conservationist in Sigourney, before stints with NRCS in Oskaloosa, Burlington, and finally as the Area Resource Conservationist in Council Bluffs. Eventually, Cosby became the State Conservationist for NRCS in Ohio for 16 years before being named Chief of the USDA agency in 2021.

“Coming to Keokuk County, Iowa, from Mississippi was a culture shock. I relied on kind and thoughtful mentors like Don to help me get settled and to learn how to work with different producers on their conservation goals,” said Cosby. “As I grew in my career, I used that example when I became a mentor to other young student trainees who were far from home. My time in Keokuk County with Don Borts shaped me as a conservationist and a leader, and I credit Don for helping me in my journey to become the 17th Chief of NRCS.”

Throughout Borts’ and Stevens’ years in Keokuk County, Sharon Fritchen has been a constant in the Sigourney office. Fritchen has helped manage the office since 1984, currently serving as Conservation Assistant for the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS). Fritchen is one of only two to ever serve in this capacity in Keokuk County.

“Sharon has been a great asset for many years. Her knowledge of Keokuk County producers and their farming operations are of great value in providing excellent customer service,” said Stevens. “She is also a farmer, – **Continued on Page 4** --



NRCS Chief Terry Cosby gives an NRCS Challenge Coin to Keokuk County District Conservationist Larry Stevens, who is retiring at the end of 2024 after 30 years in his position. Cosby visited the Sigourney Field Office on Dec. 5, 2024.

--Continued from Page 3 -- so she understands what is going on in their lives, in good times and bad. Working with Sharon over the past 30 years has been a pleasure. We are truly lucky to have such a dedicated servant to our District." Stevens said he stayed in Keokuk County because his wife's family is in the area, and he has enjoyed working with the local farmers. "The conservation ethic of our farmers makes it easy for our office in a lot of ways," he said. "We don't have a lot of problems selling (USDA or state cost-share) financial assistance programs. We have plenty of applications for CSP (Conservation Stewardship Program) and a waiting list for state cost-share to build terraces."

Borts said he enjoyed working directly with farmers. "I wasn't interested in moving up the ladder and primarily managing people," he said. "I've been interested in conservation since my dad implemented a conservation plan on his farm. I started working as a soil conservationist as soon as I got out of the military."

Since retiring in 1994, Borts has stayed in the area to farm his own ground. "It's been good to have Don around all these years, as a reference to why we implemented some of the structures across the county," said Stevens.

No-Till and Soil Health

Farmer Don Millikin has been a Keokuk SWCD Commissioner since 1976. He says Borts was influential in helping many Keokuk County farmers transition to no-till farming in the early 1980s. "When Don was DC, we got the no-till planter going in 1981," said Millikin.

He said the emphasis Stevens has placed on soil health is similar. "The biggest change to my cropland since going to no-till has been using a cereal rye cover crop," said Millikin. "Our (crop) yields are some of the best in the area, especially on the hilly ground. If you include all the trips across the field and the cost of machinery, I think we're coming out way ahead."

Stevens said the soil health and cover crop movement in recent years is similar to the no-till movement. "We asked farmers to start slowly with cover crops like we did with no-till in the 80s," said Stevens. "We are doing a lot of cost-share on 40 acres, just to get farmers to try it."

Millikin said having Borts and Stevens the past 54 years has been good for the county. "Don and Larry have been great to work with," said Millikin. "Hopefully, after Larry retires, we can get someone for another 25 years."

Stevens reiterated that Keokuk County is an attractive county for a district conservationist. "There is a lot of conservation on the ground and good conservation farmers in the area," he said. "I think there will be a lot of people interested in coming here."

NRCS Chief Terry Cosby returns to Iowa, tours districts



The gang is back together again! Staff from the Sigourney NRCS Field Office from the 1980s gathered on Dec. 5, 2024, in Sigourney. (L-R) Sharon Fritchen, Conservation Assistant; Stan Simmons, Retired Federal Technician; Terry Cosby, NRCS Chief; Don Borts, Retired District Conservationist; and Scott Shifflett, Retired State Technician. Cosby worked in this office early in his career.



NRCS Chief Terry Cosby speaks to a group of NRCS conservation partners on Dec. 6 at the Iowa Soybean Association headquarters in Ankeny. (L-R) Roger Wolf, Iowa Soybean Association Director of Conservation; Dien Judge, Conservation Districts of Iowa; Susan Kozak, Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship; NRCS Chief Terry Cosby; NRCS Regional Conservationist Curtis Elke; and State Conservationist Jon Hubbert.

CDI Vice President Wessels announces 2025 Call for Resolutions

The 2025 Call for Resolutions was sent out to all Conservation Districts of Iowa offices last week. This process provides every member of Conservation Districts of Iowa the opportunity to make your voice heard by bringing issues and concerns to the attention of state and federal decision-makers.

Throughout the 2025 Resolutions Process, all resolutions will be properly reviewed by the broader conservation community before being submitted for action.

This year, the deadline for submitting resolutions is Friday, March 28, 2025. Resolutions submitted after this deadline will not be considered for the 2025 cycle.

In prior years, some resolutions submitted could have been handled with conversations and/or negotiations with one of our partner agencies. CDI encourages districts to work with the appropriate agency first. If the district is not satisfied with the outcome of those discussions or negotiations, then submit the resolution for consideration.

If multiple districts submit similar resolutions, CDI may combine them into one unified resolution. This strategy will strengthen the position of the districts and provide a clearer, more cohesive argument when presenting the resolution. We once again offer pre-conference resolution voting by mail for commissioners. The goal is to have all 500 commissioners from Iowa's 100 districts to participate in the voting process. Last year, there were close to 400 pre-conference pre-conference ballots cast – this year, CDI hopes to surpass that number.

CDI Job Opportunities:

[Conservation Wetland Specialist - Thompson, IA](#)

[Conservation Wetland Specialist – Sioux City, IA](#)

[Wetland Engineering Technician - Atlantic, IA](#)

[Wetland Engineering Technician - Fairfield, IA](#)

[Wetland Engineering Technician - Northwood, IA](#)

CDI Poster Contest rules announced for 2025

Rules for the CDI 2025 Poster Contest have been released, and are available at this [link](#). The annual NACD and NACD Auxiliary Poster Contest provides students from kindergarten through 12th grade the chance to have their art displayed as part of a national conservation outreach initiative. Each year, the winning posters highlight the work of conservation districts and their state conservation associations, auxiliaries and agencies to protect and enhance natural resources. The contest starts at the district level; winners advance to the state level, and then to the national level, where they receive recognition at NACD's annual meeting. The poster contest is open to public, private and home-schooled students. The top three posters in each category of the national contest will receive monetary prizes. First-place winners will receive \$200; second place winners will receive \$150 and third place winners will receive \$100. For all those who entered, local sponsors may offer each a special Participation Certificate to recognize their participation. The NACD Auxiliary – through their quilt project proceeds, the Country Store at the NACD Annual Meeting and individual donors – sponsor prizes at the national level.

Save the date – 2025 Conservation Partnership Day will be held on Tuesday, March 11 at the Iowa Capitol. All SWCD Commissioners are invited to attend and meet with legislators.

2025 CDI Scholarship

Applications are available now

Conservation Districts of Iowa's 2025 scholarship applications are now available, and have been distributed to SWCDs around Iowa.

Iowa high school class of 2025 students pursuing programs of study in any field of conservation or agriculture qualifies for the CDI scholarship. The application is available at www.cdiowa.org and can be downloaded from the website.

Applicants must submit their scholarship applications to the SWCD office in the county in which they reside. Each local SWCD will choose a county application to forward to their CDI Regional Director. The regional director will choose an application to forward on for consideration at the state level.

In April, 2025, a judging team of CDI officers, regional directors and alternates will make the final decisions. Scholarship applications are judged based on the following criteria: 20 points for Involvement, Leadership and Character; 20 points for Career; 30 points for Scholastic Achievement; 30 points for Conservation Message.

CDI will make the announcements about the winning applicants on Friday, May 2. After the final selections, the top three scholarships will be awarded at the state level in the amounts of \$3,000, \$2,000 and \$1,000. Winners from the remaining six regions will each receive \$500.

First, second and third place awards will be paid directly to the applicant's school of choice in two equal installments, one upon enrollment at the beginning of the year and the second at midterm. The six other scholarships will be paid directly to the applicant's school of choice in one installment

Horizon II program seeks acres in southern Iowa for "Prairie-to-Energy Initiative"

The Horizon II project has funding available for 39,000 acres of highly erodible land in southern Iowa and northern Missouri. The project seeks to build wildlife habitat, help the environment and use sustainably harvested native prairie feedstock to create Renewable Natural Gas. There is also funding available to incentivize planting 40,000 acres of winter-hardy cereal rye cover crops which will also be harvested for renewable natural gas production. For more information, go to roesleinalternativeenergy.com.

Get ready for 2025 Spring Regionals

Host districts, dates announced for annual regional meetings

Conservation Districts of Iowa has announced the schedule for 2025 Spring Regionals, so please mark your calendars and save the date of your Spring Regional Meeting.

The first regional meetings will be held the last week of February, beginning with Region 5 on Tuesday, February 25, hosted by Harrison SWCD at 10:00 AM, followed by the Region 8 meeting hosted by Page SWCD at 4:00 PM.

On Wednesday, February 26, Lucas SWCD will host the Region 9 regional meeting in the morning at 10:00 AM, and Polk SWCD will host the Region 6 meeting at 4:00 PM.

The Region 7 meeting will be held on Thursday, February 27 at 10:00 AM hosted by Louisa SWCD.

The following week will kick off with the Region 1 meeting hosted by Cherokee SWCD. On Wednesday, March 5, Hamilton SWCD will host the Region 2 meeting at 10:00 AM, followed by Hardin SWCD hosting the Region 3 meeting at 4:00 PM.

We wrap up the Spring Regionals with the final meeting in Region 4, hosted by Allamakee SWCD at 10:00 AM.

CDI extends our sincere thanks to the IDALS Conservation Assistants in each of the host districts, who help organize these meetings.

CDI Spring Regionals 2025			
Region	SWCD Host Location	Proposed Date & Time*	Conservation Assistant
1	Cherokee	3/4/2025 (10:00 AM)	Tracy Rasmussen
2	Hamilton	3/5/2025 (10:00 AM)	Cyndy Schmanke
3	Hardin	3/5/2025 (4:00 PM)	Sarah Day
4	Allamakee	3/6/2025 (10:00 AM)	Brianne Wild
5	Harrison	2/25/2025 (10:00 AM)	Deb Mether
6	Polk	2/26/2025 (4:00 PM)	Lani Luker
7	Louisa	2/27/2025 (10:00 AM)	Rachel Thomas
8	Page	2/25/2025 (4:00 PM)	Linda Fine
9	Lucas	2/26/2025 (10:00 AM)	Connie Carpenter