

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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CDI President's Report

By President Sean Dolan

As soil and water conservation district commissioners, we all have a passion to improve and protect the natural resources in our communities. Why else would we go get signatures to be put on a ballot so that we can go to monthly meetings with no salary or stipend?

My conservation interest began in adolescence while helping my father on the farm. In our area, he was an early adopter to no-till corn and drilling soybeans. He called it "farming ugly," and I gathered from that phrase that you can't worry about what your neighbors think when you believe in an idea.

That mindset has helped me to not be afraid to try new ideas. I began using cover crops over 15 years ago, and through trial and error, I have found that drilling the seed after harvest has shown the best results on my operation.

My neighbors watched and were skeptical at first, but many have begun using the practice. More and more neighborhood fields turn green in early spring. A truly amazing sight! We are trying to add small grains to the rotation with varying degrees of success, and I have a close friend who brings cows over in the fall to graze the summer covers behind the oats and rye. I did not grow up around stock cows, so I have just recently learned how good for the soul it is to watch grazing cattle meander through a field! My wife and I are also in the planning stages with NRCS and IDALS to install a denitrification wetland on our farm. I can hardly wait to see the diverse wildlife it will bring to the area. These are the Cliff Notes of my conservation story.

We all have a story to tell. I am inviting you to come share your story with your legislators at Conservation Partnership Day in Des Moines on February 12th. We need to help get them excited to move conservation and stewardship forward in this state. The drumbeat to improve the state's water quality is getting louder. If you have not seen "What's Eating Iowa: Episode 1" on YouTube yet, take a peak. Art Cullen does a nice job on it. – **Continued on Page 2**

--Continued from Page 1 Spring Regional meetings will begin the last week in February. These meetings are a great conduit for commissioners to interact with personnel from NRCS, IDALS, and CDI. You will get updates and also have an opportunity to discuss what you're seeing at the county level.

All these events and more can be found on the CDI website. If your county has an event, or you know of events that would benefit other conservation minded people, please let us know so that we can get it posted on the calendar. Thank you to CDI vice president TC Loving for providing technical skill in improving the website!

I wish all of you happy and blessed 2026!

CDI Executive Director's Report

By Executive Director Dien Judge

The year 2025 is coming to a close, and it's a good time to reflect on the past year and look forward to the new year. This year brought many challenges to this organization, mostly caused by the actions of a new federal government administration.

We've had to deal with unpredictable funding for our programs and we've had to make the painful decision to temporarily lay off staff two different times. These disruptions do not create efficiency, they only cause problems and delay services. We're ready to put 2025 behind us and we look forward to a productive 2026, when we can keep our staff at work and we can focus on the CDI mission of informing, educating, and leading Iowans through our local soil and water conservation districts to promote conservation of natural resources.

It's always a good time to review that mission and think about how our organization can be innovative and find new ways to serve the mission. Some very important ways to serve the mission include our events throughout the year. Coming up soon will be our Conservation Partnership Day at the Iowa Capitol. This year the event will be held on Thursday, Feb 12. CDI will join our partners in conservation at the Capitol and we'll tell our story and convey the importance of our resolutions to Iowa legislators and leaders. It's a great time to gather together as commissioners and meet in person with our elected officials.

Then later in February, we'll kick off the first of our Spring Regionals for 2026. You'll see later in this newsletter that the host districts have been set for this year, and the date of your regional meeting has been set. Please mark your calendars and plan to attend your Regional Meeting. These meetings are a great opportunity to network with folks from your area of the state and compare success stories and challenges. They're also an excellent time to ask questions of our partner organizations at NRCS and IDALS.

We're also looking forward to Envirothon 2026, and participating Iowa schools are already preparing their teams for the event. If your local school or FFA organization does not participate in Envirothon, please reach out and encourage them to get involved this year. There's still time for them to get their teams organized. The 2026 Envirothon State Competition will once again be held at Jester Park in Polk County, and this year's event will be held on Monday, April 27.

That's just a few of the important CDI events coming up in 2026. We hope you have a blessed New Year and a prosperous 2026!

**Do you have a great conservation success story to share?
Send us your conservation stories
and we'll share them in the Connections newsletter.**

Spring Regionals an opportunity to share ideas



Host districts, dates announced for annual regional meetings

| CDI Spring Regionals 2026 | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Region | SWCD Host Location | Proposed Date & Time* | Conservation Assistant |
| 1 | Lyon | 3/3/2025 (10:00 AM) | Nicole Schulte |
| 2 | Emmet | 3/3/2025 (4:00 PM) | Kristi Swenson |
| 3 | Howard | 3/4/2025 (10:00 AM) | Shannon Hurd |
| 4 | Fayette | 3/4/2025 (4:00 PM) | Lori Kohlmeyer |
| 5 | West Pott. | 2/24/2025 (4:00 PM) | Brooke Bauer |
| 6 | Marshall | 2/25/2025 (10:00 AM) | Lindsey Wenner |
| 7 | Poweshiek | 2/25/2025 (4:00 PM) | Burgandy Frese |
| 8 | Montgomery | 2/24/2025 (10:00 AM) | Britany McArdle |
| 9 | Wapello | 2/26/2025 (10:00 AM) | Jenifer Heald |

Conservation Districts of Iowa has announced the schedule for 2026 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 8** on Tuesday, February 24, hosted by Montgomery SWCD at 10:00 AM, followed by the **Region 5** meeting hosted by West Pottawattamie SWCD at 4:00 PM. On Wednesday, February 25, Marshall SWCD will host the **Region 6** regional meeting in the morning at 10:00 AM, and Poweshiek SWCD will host the **Region 7** meeting at 4:00 PM. The **Region 9** meeting will be held on Thursday, February 26 at 10:00 AM hosted by Wapello SWCD.

The following week will kick off with the **Region 1** meeting hosted by Lyon SWCD on Tuesday, March 3 at 10:00 AM. Emmet SWCD will host the **Region 2** meeting later that day at 4:00 PM. – Continued on Page 4

Continued from Page 3 -- Howard SWCD will host the **Region 3** meeting on Wednesday, March 4 at 10:00 AM, and we wrap up the Spring Regionals with the final meeting in **Region 4**, later that day, hosted by Fayette SWCD at 4:00 PM.

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

Iowa farmers partner with NRCS to invest in conservation funding

Iowa farmers and other private landowners invested millions in conservation practices to help treat natural resource issues on their lands last year, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Through four major Farm Bill conservation programs offered in Iowa, the [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program](#) (ACEP), [Conservation Stewardship Program](#) (CSP), [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#) (EQIP), and [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#) (RCPP), Iowa farmers contracted with NRCS to address natural resource concerns such as soil erosion and water quality on about 258,000 private land acres in fiscal year 2025 (FY25).

Overall, NRCS obligated \$75.3 million in conservation practice funding to Iowa farmers in FY25 through 1,337 Farm Bill program contracts. Farmers and other USDA customers can sign up for Farm Bill conservation programs on a continuous basis, and most are funded through three- to five-year contracts.

State Conservationist Jon Hubbert says Iowa farmers, contractors, agribusiness companies, and state and local government agencies should be congratulated for the work they accomplished alongside NRCS in 2025. “Iowa is unique in the way we partner with so many others to implement conservation plans, practices and programs,” he said. “It’s great to see the continued interest in conservation here in Iowa. Working together with Iowa landowners, we can help them meet their conservation goals.”

The most popular conservation practices in Iowa, by number of contracts with Iowa NRCS throughout 2025, include: Grazing Management, Cover Crop, Fence (to support grazing management), Brush Management, Watering Facility (to support grazing management)

Program Breakdown

ACEP: NRCS helps landowners, land trusts, and other entities protect, restore, and enhance wetlands, grasslands, and working farms through conservation easements. During FY25, NRCS obligated about \$6.9 million through three new easements that will cover 523 acres. Included in ACEP funding is more than \$1 million in stewardship activities on existing easements, which could include prescribed burns, tree removal, or controlling invasive species. There are 1,722 federally funded easements in Iowa across 197,000 acres.

CSP: Through CSP, NRCS helps farmers build a customized plan to meet their conservation goals and needs. Iowa NRCS obligated \$21 million through new and renewed CSP contracts during the past year to 320 landowners who signed five-year contracts, covering about 142,000 acres.

-- Continued on Page 5

Continued from Page 4 --

Statewide leaders in CSP:

Jackson County led the state for the third consecutive year with 30 new and renewed CSP contracts, totaling 6,878 acres, with an obligation of nearly \$1.5 million.

Jones County was next with 24 contracts, covering 17,467 acres and an obligation of \$2.6 million.

Winneshiek County had the third most CSP contracts with 22, covering 6,638 acres, obligating more than \$1 million.

EQIP: Iowa NRCS contracted about 43 percent of new federal conservation funding through EQIP – a voluntary program that promotes agricultural production and environmental quality, where farmers can choose from a conservation list developed at the county level to treat local resource issues. Through EQIP, NRCS obligated \$32.2 million covering 65,658 acres through 467 contracts.

Statewide leaders in EQIP:

Lucas County led the state with 18 new EQIP contracts that will help treat resource concerns on 2,553 acres at an obligation of nearly \$1.4 million.

Wapello County was second in Iowa with 16 contracts that will cover 5,450 acres for total obligation of nearly \$1.7 million.

Wayne County had the third most EQIP contracts with 15, covering 2,541 acres, obligating \$708,978.

Statewide EQIP highlights:

Through the **Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI)**, Iowa NRCS obligated more than \$4.6 million, covering 15,840 acres through 50 new contracts. The goal of MRBI is for landowners to adopt practices that will minimize the contributions of nitrogen and phosphorus to surface waters within the Mississippi River basin.

Iowa NRCS obligated more than \$5 million through 276 program contracts, covering about 10,500 acres, to fund **wildlife habitat practices** statewide. Some of the practices include conservation cover, brush management, tree/shrub establishment, wetland restoration, and wildlife habitat planting.

Through the **National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI)**, Iowa NRCS obligated nearly \$1.5 million through 19 contracts covering 3,658 acres. Through NWQI, NRCS provides targeted funding to treat water quality problems in small watersheds.

RCPP: Iowa NRCS provided more than \$15 million to Iowans in 2025 through RCPP projects that will treat resource concerns on more than 50,000 acres. NRCS assisted producers through 13 partnership agreements and 547 contracts. For the four RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA) projects, a conservation partner directed the project, taking the lead in conservation planning and contracting.

Disaster Recovery

NRCS also helped several Iowa communities recover from recent flooding and damaging high winds through with assistance through the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program. NRCS funding exceeded \$1.4 million to assist the cities of Pleasant Hill, Johnston, and Spencer, and Polk and Webster counties by helping with debris clearing and removal and stream bank protection.

For more information, please visit [nrcs.usda.gov](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov) or contact your local [USDA Service Center](#). Detailed Iowa NRCS program results and information are available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2025-12/2025At-A-Glance.pdf> or <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/resources/data-and-reports/rca-data-viewer>.

CDI Vice President T.C. Loving announces 2026 Call for Resolutions

The 2026 Call for Resolutions was sent out to all Conservation Districts of Iowa offices on December 15.

The CDI Resolutions 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 2026 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 27, 2026. Resolutions submitted after this deadline will not be considered for the 2026 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.



T.C. Loving
CDI Vice President

Your day at the Capitol: Conservation Partnership Day

Plan to attend Thursday, Feb. 12 in the Capitol Rotunda

Mark your calendars and plan to attend the 2026 Conservation Partnership Day, to be held on Thursday, Feb. 12, 2026 at the Iowa Capitol.

Conservation Districts of Iowa is once again organizing the event, bringing Iowa's leading soil and water conservation organizations together in Des Moines to meet with Iowa legislators.

All Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners are invited to attend. It's important to have a large group of commissioners in attendance, so please plan to participate!

CDI Poster Contest rules and information released for 2026

The CDI Poster Contest is once again open to Iowa youth, from Kindergarten through 12th grade. Participants this year will make posters using the theme “Soil. Where it all Begins”.

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.

For complete rules and information about the Poster Contest, please visit the CDI website at <https://cdiowa.org/get-involved/poster-contest/>.

Iowa had a national winner in the 2024 contest with the poster made by Chen Gao of East Pottawattamie Soil and Water Conservation District.

CDI is seeking a new sponsor for our Poster Contest, so if you’re aware of a business or organization that would be interested in sponsoring the contest, please let us know!

Soil.
Where it all Begins



CDI Scholarships announced for 2026

CDI, in partnership with local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, is proud to support the higher education of Iowa students who are passionate about conservation and agriculture.

Information, rules and application materials have been posted on CDI’s website at <https://cdiowa.org/get-involved/scholarships/>.

High school seniors graduating in Iowa’s Class of 2026 who plan to pursue a program of study in any field related to conservation or agriculture are eligible to apply for the CDI Conservation Scholarship. While a wide range of studies qualify, preference will be given to students pursuing degrees directly related to conservation and/or agriculture. Scholarship funds must be used toward the recipient’s first year of college education.

2026 Application & Instructions

Please note: **The 2026 scholarship application form has been updated.**

Previous versions will **not** be accepted.

Applicants should read and follow all instructions carefully, as incomplete or incorrectly filled-out applications will be disqualified. Pay close attention to submission deadlines—late applications will not be considered.

The official application form is available at: <http://www.cdiowa.org/>

Application Process & Deadlines

- **November 2025:** Participating SWCDs begin promoting the – **Continued on Page 8**

Continued from Page 7 -- 2026 Conservation Scholarship.

- **Friday, February 6, 2026:** Applicants must submit completed applications to their county SWCD office (based on county of residence). To find your local office, visit the [USDA Service Center Locator](#) and select your county on the map.
- **Friday, March 13, 2026:** Each SWCD selects one county winner to forward to their CDI Regional Director.
- **Friday, March 27, 2026:** The Regional Director selects one regional winner to advance to the state-level competition.
- **Friday, April 3, 2026:** A panel of CDI Officers and members of the CDI Scholarship Committee reviews regional finalists and selects state winners.
- **Friday, May 1, 2026:** CDI notifies local SWCD offices of the winning applicants. Local offices will then contact the student, their school, and local media with results.

No applications will be considered if submitted after these deadlines.

Envirothon provides Iowa youth with a unique learning experience

Conservation Districts of Iowa is preparing once again for the Iowa Envirothon competition for Iowa youth. Next year's competition will be held in the spring of 2026, and will be open to high school youth from all around the state of Iowa.

Envirothon is an environmental and natural resources conservation problem-solving, leadership and academic competition for kids grades 9-12 or ages 14-19 across the United States, Canada, China and Singapore. The program incorporates STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) principles, hands-on learning and outdoor field experiences. Envirothon is a program of the National Conservation Foundation, and is operated in Iowa by CDI in partnership with the Iowa Conservation Education Coalition.

The registration link for the 2026 competition is now live on the CDI website, www.cdiowa.org and teams can register before the deadline of Feb. 26, 2026.

We hope you'll reach out to your local school district and encourage them to get involved in Envirothon



**CONSERVATION
DISTRICTS OF IOWA**

With support from



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