

# 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**

I can't believe one quarter of 2026 has already flown by! I need to get the oats planted, but it seems other more important tasks need to be completed first. A couple of those tasks occurred last week.

On Tuesday, I attended the Celebrate Iowa's Outdoors Day at the Capitol in Des Moines. This event was led by the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and CDI was one of the sponsors. Over 350 Iowans attended and we listened to panel discussions on how outdoor activities positively impact the mental and physical health of all citizens. Three brave lawmakers even sat on one of the panels and gave their opinions. With the large crowd in the Rotunda, many of the lawmakers passed through and I was able to have a short conversation with my senator and a local member of the house.

On the following day, the NACD Spring Fly-In took place in Washington, D.C. Dien Judge, T.C. Loving, Clare Lindahl (Executive Director of the Soil and Water Conservation Society), and I engaged in productive discussions with each of Iowa's six legislators or their agricultural staff representatives. At every meeting, we emphasized:

- The need to get more Technical Assistance out to our county offices so that we can get more practices on the ground faster.
- Iowa's unique relationship with IDALS employees, district employees, and SWCD boards all being housed in federal offices and the importance of keeping them all open.
- With the NRCS moving to a "1 file, 1 farmer" platform that the privacy of these files will need to be maintained the highest security possible.
- As options to graze and hay CRP grasslands are

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- -- we urged responsible use that still protected land and water, while still promoting wildlife habitat.

Everyone agreed that the discussions were encouraging, and our connections are expected to grow even stronger in the future.

At a NACD reception following the meetings, I met some folks from Maryland. They explained the many measures they are taking to keep nitrates and phosphorus out of Chesapeake Bay. The state is providing cost share dollars to offset the transportation costs of moving chicken litter upwards of 50 miles to fields that have lower phosphorus levels. T.C. and I visited with the Washington state association president where they grow over 200 different crops and have diverse weather patterns due to the state geography. After these discussions, I realized that even though we face different challenges across this nation, the goal of healthy, resilient soils and clean water remains the same.

The following day, before returning home, the Iowa group met with NRCS Assistant Chief, Jimmy Emmons. Jimmy had a major role in developing the Regenerative CSP and EQIP pilot programs and he explained his vision on how those contracts will work and demonstrate the power of regenerative practices. Jimmy has adopted many of these practices on his farm and ranch in Oklahoma, so he knows what he is talking about.

We finished Spring Regionals early in March and I want to thank all who made the effort to attend one. Thank you to the CA's whose counties hosted a meeting. I know you all have plenty to do, so planning a meeting takes more effort. I especially enjoyed the local presentations. They were all informative and very interesting!

Back to the oats. I am planning to have a denitrification wetland constructed on a portion of the field where the oats are to be, so a tile investigation needed to be performed for NRCS engineers. That is also completed and the holes are filled in and leveled. I think I'm ready to plant. When I write to you again, they should be green.

Have a safe Spring.

Sean

## Executive Director's Report

By Dien Judge

February and March are an extra busy time for CDI, starting with our Conservation Partnership Day at the Capitol, then travel to San Antonio, Texas for the NACD annual conference, then it was back to Iowa for the annual trip around the state for Spring Regionals. After nine meetings in different communities all around Iowa, there was a short time in the office to get caught up...before Celebrate Iowa's Outdoors Day and then off to Washington, D.C. for the Spring Fly-In. I truly enjoy traveling around and meeting with people to promote soil and water conservation programs, and the past two months have been fun but exhausting.

It is rewarding work, and I believe we are making a difference every day. Each incremental step that is made by a farmer or landowner to preserve the soil is a step in the right direction, and we can see the progress as we travel around the state.

One thing I learned this week that is our State Conservationist of Iowa, Jon Hubbert, will be retiring at the end of April. I have gotten to know Jon in my short time here at CDI, and I will really miss his leadership at the Iowa NRCS office. He has had a long career in conservation, and Iowa was lucky to have him as our State Conservationist.

Looking ahead to April, we have the annual Soil and Water Conservation Week coming up this month.

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This is a time when we ask all our Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners to go the extra mile to help promote the work your district is involved with. A packet was recently sent out to all districts with some ideas to help share your story with local media, etc. Please take a look and try to make it an extra special Soil and Water Conservation Week April 26 through May 3.

Also later this month is the Iowa Envirothon state competition. This is one of the highlights of the year for me, as we get to see some of Iowa's best youth excel in competition. Envirothon participants are future conservationists, and we hope they have a positive learning experience. We had more than 50 teams participate in regional competitions, and the top 15 teams will be coming to Jester Park here in Polk County on Monday, April 27. The winning team at the state competition will represent Iowa in the international Envirothon competition in Mississippi later this summer.

For many of you, the Spring season will be a busy time of planting this year's crops and tending to your fields. I hope you have favorable weather for a successful planting season.

## *CDI co-hosts 'Celebrate Iowa's Outdoors Day' at the Capitol*

Conservation Districts of Iowa joined together with numerous organizations to host Celebrate Iowa's Outdoors Day on Tuesday, March 24, with more than 350 people in attendance.

Those attending heard from a list of speakers, including Ryan Smith of the Iowa Wildlife Federation, Josh Divan of Pheasants Forever, Graham McGaffin of the Nature Conservancy and Adam Shirley of the Iowa County Conservation System.

A panel of legislators moderated by Amber Markham of the Nature Conservancy took questions about their priorities regarding natural resources and outdoor recreation in Iowa. Legislators participating in the panel included Sen. Kara Warme, Rep. Norlin Mommsen and Rep. Austin Baeth.

Attendees also heard from a group of community leaders on economic development, public health and soil health and water quality.



*Iowa Department of Natural Resources Director Kayla Lyon was one of the speakers who addressed the crowds at this year's Celebrate Iowa's Outdoors Day at the Iowa Capitol. The event was coordinated by numerous organizations, including Conservation Districts of Iowa. Iowa legislators were delivered a message in support of protecting and conserving natural resources.*

# *Top teams advance to state Envirothon competition*

A total of 51 Envirothon teams of high school students from all around the state of Iowa participated in regional online testing this month, held from March 16-27. The students took exams in aquatic ecology, forestry and prairie, soils and land use, and wildlife.

From those 51 teams, the top 15 teams will advance to the state competition, which will be held on Monday, April 27 at Jester Park Nature Center in Granger, IA.

The top 15 teams will represent Decorah High School, North Fayette Valley High School, Muscatine High School, Forest City High School, Madrid Junior High School, Marshalltown High School, Beckman Catholic High School, Unity Christian High School, North Polk High School, South Tama County High School, Davenport North High School, and Williamsburg High School.

Several volunteer positions are still open for the state Envirothon competition. If you're interested in volunteering, please contact Regan Davis at [regan@cdiowa.org](mailto:regan@cdiowa.org).

Conservation Districts of Iowa is organizing the Iowa Envirothon competition for Iowa youth, which is open to teams of high school youth from all around the state of Iowa. If your school is not involved in Envirothon, please let them know that we would like to help them get involved in the future.

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.

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



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# Get ready to celebrate Soil and Water Conservation Week

Every year, SWCDs across the country celebrate Stewardship Week as a way to promote natural resource conservation. This year, Soil and Water Conservation Week begins April 26<sup>th</sup> and runs through May 3<sup>rd</sup>. The theme for this year is "Soil. Where it all Begins".

Please celebrate the week by hosting an outreach activity to promote the outstanding work your district is involved with. As we have done in previous years, we ask that the districts share what activities you are doing that week, so please share your pics, activities and ideas with the central office staff and CDI staff! If you have pictures, please also send the photos to [Media@iowaagriculture.gov](mailto:Media@iowaagriculture.gov) and we will add the photos to our Facebook photo album. **Don't forget to include captions for your pictures.**

Attached you will find some ideas to help you celebrate the week as well as some talking points to help you promote things you are doing in your district. Feel free to also print the attached flyer and display it in your office or throughout your community. We have also included logos you can insert on the signature line of your emails or incorporate onto any articles or press releases.

We would like to see all districts get involved this year! Let's be creative again this year to keep promoting the great work Soil and Water Conservation Districts do every day!

## CDI Poster Contest rules and information released for 2026

The CDI Poster Contest is once again open to Iowa youth, from Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> 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!



# CDI represents Iowa Soil & Water Commissioners in Washington DC

## Dolan, Loving meet with Iowa Congressional Delegation during Spring Fly-In

Washington, D.C. – Conservation Districts of Iowa leadership participated in the National Association of Conservation Districts’ Spring Fly-In, engaging directly with members of Congress and federal agency partners to advance priorities that strengthen America’s voluntary, locally led conservation delivery system.

Across Iowa, conservation districts play a critical role in addressing natural resource priorities on working lands. From soil health to drought resilience to nutrient management, conservation districts translate national priorities into practical, locally relevant solutions.

Governed by locally elected officials with deep roots in their communities, conservation districts serve as trusted partners to farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards. They provide technical assistance, develop conservation plans, and connect landowners and producers to the tools and resources needed to succeed.

CDI President Sean Dolan, Vice President T.C. Loving and Executive Director Dien Judge met with congressional offices and federal partners, including NRCS Assistant Chief Jimmy Emmons.

The Iowa conservation leaders discussed national priorities, including:

- Passing a [bipartisan Farm Bill](#) that supports producers and strengthens locally led conservation
- Maintaining strong funding for [FY2027 appropriations](#), including NRCS Conservation Operations, the Watershed Protection & Flood Prevention, Watershed Rehabilitation Program, Forest Service’s State & Private Forestry Programs, Forest Stewardship Program, and EPA Section 319 Nonpoint Source Management Program.
- Investing in the conservation workforce and local delivery infrastructure
- Ensuring federal programs remain flexible and responsive to local priorities



*Conservation Districts of Iowa met with Iowa’s Congressional delegation last week in Washington, D.C. Pictured are, from left, CDI Executive Director Dien Judge, Sen. Chuck Grassley, CDI President Sean Dolan and Vice President T.C. Loving.*

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**The Locally Led Conservation Delivery System**

America’s locally led conservation delivery system is a unique partnership across local, state, and federal government. In Iowa, conservation districts, state agencies, and federal partners work together to deliver conservation through key partnerships. This model ensures landowners and operators can access trusted, locally relevant technical assistance whether or not they participate in federal financial assistance programs.

This partnership not only delivers on the ground outcomes but maximizes the impact of federal investment. In Iowa, conservation districts leverage state, local, and in-kind contributions to stretch federal dollars further while ensuring conservation solutions are effective, efficient, and locally led.

CDI leaders met in person with Sen. Chuck Grassley, Sen. Joni Ernst, Rep. Randy Feenstra and Rep. Zach Nunn. They met with staff from the offices of Rep. Ashley Hinson and Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks.



*Pictured above, from left, CDI Vice President T.C. Loving, Sen. Joni Ernst, CDI President Sean Dolan. Pictured below, Dolan, Rep. Zach Nunn, Loving and CDI Executive Director Dien Judge.*

*Pictured above, from left, CDI Vice President T.C. Loving, Rep. Randy Feenstra, CDI President Sean Dolan, CDI Executive Director Dien Judge. CDI also met with staff members from the offices of Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks and Rep. Ashley Hinson.*





*Pictured at left, USDA-NRCS Assistant Chief Jimmy Emmons, CDI President Sean Dolan and CDI Vice President T.C. Loving. This was a productive conversation on the topic of the USDA's Regenerative Agriculture Pilot Program, as well as how our partnership works together to promote soil and water conservation practices.*

## INHF works to promote IWiLL

The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation is working on a project to promote Iowa's Water and Land Legacy, a 2010 voter-approved state constitutional amendment establishing a dedicated trust fund for natural resources, soil conservation, wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation in Iowa. CDI has a standing resolution in support of funding the trust fund.

Grant Young, INHF advocacy coordinator, will be speaking on a Zoom meeting on Thursday, April 2 at noon. CDI will be sending out a Zoom invitation to commissioners on Wednesday, April 1. If you don't receive the invitation and wish to join the meeting, please send an email to [dien@cdiowa.org](mailto:dien@cdiowa.org).

The event will provide education as well as a space for people to ask questions or give any comments or concerns about the program.

Anyone interested in learning more about the IWill effort is encouraged to sign up at the following link: <https://tinyurl.com/IWILLsignup>

**Do you have a conservation  
success story or an event to share?**

*Please send us your stories and we'll share them with our members!*