

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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President's Report

By Sean Dolan

Today is another absolutely beautiful day in Eastern Iowa! A month ago, when I was writing, it was cold, wet and dreary. Now, we could use a shot of rain, but the heat and sun has really perked up the growing plants.

Once again, cover crop fields are shining around here. We experienced some high wind days a few weeks ago where visibility was affected by all of the top soil blowing around. It is a satisfying feeling knowing that my soil isn't leaving and I may even be receiving some of my neighbors.

I want to address the annual conference for CDI that is coming up in August. The executive committee made the decision to change the format of the conference this year. We have shifted from beginning the meeting on a Monday morning to Tuesday morning and compressing the business meeting, speakers, silent auction for scholarships and awards presentation all into one day.

Our whole motivation for the changes is to try to increase attendance by commissioners and assistant commissioners. We have received feedback that Monday is the first day of school and parents and grandparents want to be around home for that event. Another concern raised was the willingness of commissioners to commit the time to a multiple day event.

I feel we have done our best to construct an agenda that allows us to get our business completed and to listen to speakers who will provide you with relevant information to bring back to your local communities. I appreciate the concern of commissioners who have attended this conference for many years and even decades. It is the one time of year to see and talk to many friends from all over the state.

My hope is that we have a huge increase in attendance and you have the opportunity to meet many more friends. If you have never attended the conference before, you will

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be amazed at how great everyone is and you will be energized by the passion for conservation that everyone has! Please mark your calendars and make the commitment to attend the annual conference on August 25th. If time allows, take the drive to Ames Monday evening. We will have an informal reception that night to meet up with everyone.

A big thank you goes out to IDALS as they cover hotel costs for everyone! Wednesday morning, we will also provide another learning opportunity by hosting a tour at the Helland Farm. On Nick's farm you will get to see conservation practices such as buffer strips, bioreactors and a wetland at work.

Summer is a great time for individuals and districts to host events to show area producers how practices can work on their land. Next week, I am part of an event on Relay Cropping hosted by the American Flood Coalition, ISU and the Northeast Iowa RC&D. In early July, I am having a shop Coffee Talk on cover cropping hosted by the Iowa Soybean Association. My point in telling you this is that you and your district don't have to do these events alone. There are many organizations that have the experience and willingness to help you hold a successful event in your area.

If your district has any concerns or suggestions for improvement for CDI, please reach out to me or our Executive Director, Dien Judge. We will try to attend one of your meeting if you wish. My number is (319) 310-8033 and email address is dolansean1@gmail.com. Thank you for all you do in your communities and I look forward to seeing you in August.

- Sean

Executive Director's Report

By Dien Judge

I've had the opportunity to drive around southern and eastern Iowa a little in the last few weeks, and it's interesting and heartening to see the different conservation practices along the way. Some people driving along an Iowa highway may not recognize the various different practices that farmers implement to help conserve the soil and improve water quality, but most Iowans know that farmers are always looking for ways to improve their farmland, make it more productive, and preserve it for future generations.

At Conservation Districts of Iowa, we work to promote the proven conservation practices that we know will improve soil health and water quality. Our efforts to promote these practices at CDI are just part of a large group of organizations working together toward our common goals. Saving and preserving our precious topsoil in Iowa, and implementing practices to improve water quality are making an impact. But we are only getting started. We're looking forward to several events and opportunities this summer and fall that CDI staff will attend to promote conservation. One of these events is CDI's 80th Annual Conference. You'll see in other parts of this newsletter the information about the conference. Please plan to attend and participate.

Lastly, we should reflect a little on the now-adjourned Iowa Legislative Session. While there were some disappointments, there was a lot of good news for conservation programs this year. We hope all SWCD Commissioners have enjoyed our CDI Legislative Updates each week through the session. If you haven't been receiving the CDI Legislative Updates during the session, then that means I don't have your email address. If you'd like to be added to the email list for our updates, just send me a note at dien@cdiowa.org.

We hope you have a great summer!

CDI's 80th Annual Conference set to be held in Ames on Aug. 25

Conservation Districts of Iowa will hold its 80th Annual Conference at the Gateway Hotel & Conference Center in Ames on Aug. 25. Please mark your calendars and plan to attend!

Several exciting changes to the conference schedule have been made this year, and once again all Iowa Soil & Water Conservation District Commissioners and Assistant Commissioners can attend free of charge. Registration costs for SWCD commissioners and assistant commissioners will once again be covered by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship.

All 500 Soil & Water Conservation District Commissioners are welcome to attend and participate in the conference.

Changes to the schedule of events at the conference will allow most of the conference events

to be held on one day, Tuesday, Aug. 25, with the exciting addition of an optional tour on Wednesday, Aug. 26 of the nearby Helland Farm featuring some excellent examples of soil and water conservation practices and structures.

Conference attendees who arrive on Monday evening, Aug. 24, will be welcomed with an informal President's Reception at 7:00 PM at Gateway. Then things get started early on Tuesday, Aug. 25, with a breakfast at 6:30 AM including a formal Welcome by Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig, and a keynote presentation by agronomist Ruth McCabe. This will be followed by a break to visit our sponsors, and then the CDI Annual Business Meeting of our organization is held. All locally elected Soil & Water Conservation District Commissioners from dues-paying districts are eligible to participate in this meeting, where important votes are conducted on CDI Resolutions. Members will also conduct the election of the CDI President and Vice President.

Your participation in this process is important to the success of your organization in the future. CDI Resolutions passed at the annual meeting involving state policies are taken to the Iowa Legislature and pushed by CDI's professional lobbyist. Resolutions involving federal policy are advanced and moved through the resolutions process in the National Association of Conservation Districts. Your involvement in this process at the CDI Annual Conference is critical to making your voice heard to influence government policies involving conservation programs. In addition to the business meeting, the conference will include a legislative update from CDI Lobbyist Jim Obradovich.

Following the business meeting, an Awards Luncheon will be held and conservation leaders from all around the state will be honored with awards.

In the afternoon, those in attendance will hear a presentation from Iowa Assistant Attorney General Eric Dirth, who will be available to answer questions from commissioners about their legal duties and obligations. –

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CDI's 80th Annual Conference will be held August 25, 2026 at the Gateway Hotel & Conference Center in Ames.

Continued from Page 3 --And later in the afternoon, attendees will hear from Iowa DNR Water Quality Coordinator Adam Schneiders, who will focus his presentation on nitrate pollution and water quality improvement efforts and challenges.

Conference registration forms are being distributed to all Conservation Assistants, so please plan to register and attend the CDI Annual Conference.

The following day, on Wednesday, Aug. 26, is an optional guided tour of the nearby Helland Farm, which will be included with the conference registration.

For more information about registration, go to <https://www.cdiowa.org/annual-conference/>. Rooms can be reserved after completing the registration process.

Meet Vella Batdorf, CDI's top scholarship winner for 2026

Vella Batdorf, a resident of Scott SWCD in Bettendorf, is this year's top scholarship winner for Conservation Districts of Iowa's scholarship program. The top CDI scholarship is an award of \$3,000 to



help with her education.

Vella is a senior at Pleasant Valley High School, where she maintains an unweighted 4.0 GPA with a weighted 4.39.

She has completed a challenging course load of many AP and dual enrollment courses, including Calculus 3 and Differential Equations. She participated in school activities as a member of PV's student council, Spartan Assembly, and within her role of vice president of the school's Women in STEM club.

Outside of school is where her true passions lie, with her involvement as a member of Bettendorf Conservation Council and her time spent volunteering with various environmental organizations.

If she still has time after all her activities, Vella enjoys hiking, baking, and traveling with her family.

She hopes that pursuing agricultural engineering will allow her to make a difference in the world, increasing sustainability and conservation initiatives in agricultural practices as well as creating more efficient methods of food production that maintain a positive environmental impact.

Post high school, her plan is to attend Iowa State University to gain a degree in agricultural engineering with a minor in biology.

Vella Batdorf is the top winner of the CDI Scholarship program for 2026. Vella will receive an award of \$3,000 from CDI.

Howard SWCD distributes trees for Arbor Day

The Howard Soil and Water Conservation District (HSWCD) celebrated Soil and Water Conservation Week by distributing 71 potted Spruce trees for Arbor Day to third graders at the Howard-Winneshiek and Notre Dame schools. Students were given a history of Arbor Day, including the importance of trees for soil health and water quality, and instructions on how to plant and care for their trees.

The HSWCD also hosted their 47th annual Natural Resources Day Outdoor Classroom at the Prairie's Edge Nature Center near Cresco with 99 fifth graders from the Howard-Winneshiek and Notre Dame schools in attendance. Stations included *Entomology* presented by Angela Bries from Howard County Conservation, *Backyard Conservation* with Kathy Moen, NRCS District Conservationist, *Bee Keeping* with volunteer Jed Becker, *Woodland Plants & Flowers* with volunteer Connie Richter, and *Soil Health* presented by Alicia Sedlmayr, NRCS Soil Scientist and Brandon Shatek, NRCS Soil Conservationist. Thanks to our station

leaders, Howard County Conservation for use of their Nature Center grounds, the bus drivers, fifth-grade teachers, and students for making the day an enjoyable success!



Students in the Howard Soil and Water Conservation District learn about soil health during their Natural Resources Day Outdoor Classroom event at Prairie's Edge Nature Center near Cresco.



Howard SWCD students learned about beekeeping during the Outdoor Classroom event.

Tama SWCD's annual 5th Grade Outdoor Classroom held



Tama SWCD's annual 5th Grade Outdoor Classroom began as a teacher workshop in 1974. By the teachers' requests, it was soon transformed into a 5th grade event. This year, 251 students rotated through 20-minute sessions focusing on soils, wildlife, wildlife population dynamics, prairies, forestry, Lakota bison robe game, a recycling relay, water quality, and fishing and boating safety.

At left, Iowa DNR District Forester Joe Herring led student groups in forest design using different tree species, represented by colored flags, to create biodiversity. The blue grass represents a pond needing protection from sediment and other contaminants. Below left, during the Tama SWCD annual 5th Grade Outdoor Classroom, the kids got good and dirty at the Prairies class with TCCB Director Curtis Behrens. Besides learning about prairies, students made "prairie balls" with soil and with native forb seed donated by Allendan Seed Company of Winterset. The prairie balls were used by TCCB to improve native species diversity in its native prairie plantings. Below right, students raced and learned to think about reusing and recycling an item before they toss it in the trash. They thought of some pretty ingenious ways to reuse items!



IAWA Launches Conservation Compass

A suite of tools, info, and people to navigate conservation funding options

ANKENY, Iowa – The Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance is proud to announce Conservation Compass – a suite of tools and education to help farmers find, compare, and get signed up for conservation cost share and other incentives.

It can be found at www.TheCompass.ag.

Why it matters: Conservation incentives improve farm profitability in the near term by paying for new conservation practices or mitigating risk, and in the long term by improving a farm’s resiliency and soil potential. “Conservation Compass is the only state-based tool that helps both farmers and professionals break through information overload on cost share,” said Rebekah Jones, Communications Director of IAWA.

“We chose the name ‘Compass’ because in the end, the farmer is choosing their destination. We’re just there to guide them to the right help along the way.”

Conservation Compass builds on the award-winning success of costsharecompare.com. The comparison site was a pilot initiative to cut through the complexity of program information. The new platform takes everything that made the original site effective and expands it:

- **A broader range of programs:** Two dozen listed plus more on the way, with maintained accuracy
- **Additional practices listed:** cover crops, reduced tillage, nitrogen management, prairie establishment, extended crop rotations, and livestock practices
- **A new streamlined experience** that guides users from discovery to action

Zooming in

Through the Compass, farmers and conservation professionals alike can:

1. Filter programs by practice and source of funding.
2. Get connected with a Conservation Agronomist ASAP.
3. Learn how to combine programs for maximum payment rates in order to incentivize change.
4. Invest time in the learning hub to learn about carbon markets, funding sources, and what to expect when signing up for a program.

The [Iowa State University Nutrient Reduction Dashboard](#) shows that Iowa utilized close to \$600 million in state and federal conservation funding in one year (2023, the most recent available data). That doesn’t even include private funding like carbon market programs.

However, programs are scattered across the internet; some don’t even have a website or informational landing page, making it hard for farmers to find or understand them. Even the professionals can get confused.

The Compass changes that and empowers farmers to make a positive impact on their farms and their communities.

The Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance (IAWA) is increasing the pace and scale of farmer-led efforts to improve water quality in Iowa. Founded in 2014 by Iowa Corn, the Iowa Soybean Association, and the Iowa Pork Producers Association, IAWA is building public-private partnerships focused on implementing water quality solutions. Learn more at www.iaaqwater.org.

**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 and partners!*

USDA announces appointment of Colton Buckley as NRCS Chief

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Department of Agriculture today announced the appointment of [Colton L. Buckley](#) as Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the nation's primary private lands conservation agency. Buckley, who currently serves as Associate Chief of NRCS, brings extensive leadership experience in conservation and agriculture policy to the role.

As Associate Chief, he has overseen the agency's financial and technical assistance programs, management and strategy, science and technology, soil science and resource assessment deputy areas, and partnerships division. Previously, he served as Chief of Staff for NRCS and as Chief Executive Officer of the National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils.

Raised on his grandparents' cattle ranch outside Gatesville, Texas, Buckley has deep roots in production agriculture, and advocacy for practical, producer-led conservation solutions. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Services and Development from Tarleton State University and a Master of Arts in Communication from Liberty University. His career includes roles at national and local conservation organizations, rural economic development entities, and service on multiple advisory boards—including the Texas A&M University System Board of Regents, to which he was appointed by Governor Rick Perry.

Buckley stated, "I am deeply honored to step into the role of Chief of NRCS under the Farmer First leadership of President Trump, Secretary Rollins, and Under Secretary Fordyce. Our mission will be to empower America's farmers and ranchers with the tools, flexibility, and support they need to steward our natural resources while strengthening family farming operations, rural economies, and ensuring our nation's food security. We will focus on locally led, results-driven conservation that works hand-in-hand with producers—not against them. My top priority is keeping American working lands in American working hands." The Natural Resources Conservation Service provides technical and financial assistance to help farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners conserve natural resources. For more information about NRCS programs and initiatives, visit nrcs.usda.gov.



The USDA has announced the appointment of Colton Buckley as the new Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

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. Conservation Districts of Iowa has a standing resolution in support of funding the trust fund.

Iowa's Water & Land Legacy events will be held around the state, allowing interested individuals to participate and learn more about IWiLL and the efforts to move this program forward.

The following meetings have been scheduled:

- Central Iowa – Tuesday, June 9, 6:00 PM - Franklin Ave. Public Library, 5000 Franklin Ave., Des Moines – RSVP to Emily Durbala at emily.durbala@drake.edu
- Southern Iowa – Thursday, June 11, 11:00 AM – Carnegie Evans Public Library, 203 Benton Ave., Albia – RSVP to Kaiden Martin at kmartin@inhf.org
- Southwest Iowa – Tuesday, June 16, Noon – Cass County Community Center, 8-5 W 10th St., Atlantic – RSVP to Emily Durbala at emily.durbala@drake.edu
- Northwest Iowa – Thursday, June 18, Noon – Storm Lake Public Library, 609 Cayuga Street, Storm Lake – RSVP to Kaiden Martin at kmartin@inhf.org
- Northeast Iowa – Tuesday, June 23, 6:00 PM – Independence Public Library, 805 1st St. E, Independence – RSVP to Kaiden Martin at kmartin@inhf.org
- Eastern Iowa – Thursday, June 25, Noon – Coralville Public Library, 1401 5th St., Coralville – RSVP to Emily Durbala at emily.durbala@drake.edu

For more information about these events, check the website www.iowaswaterandlandlegacy.org

Newly elected officials required to take public information training

Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners are included in this mandate

Iowa law (Iowa Code § 21.12) requires newly elected or appointed public officials to complete mandatory training on Open Meetings and Public Records (Chapters 21 & 22) within 90 days of taking the oath or assuming office. The 1–2 hour training covers meeting notices, closed sessions, and records requests, with certificates issued upon completion.

Approved Training Providers

The [Iowa Public Information Board \(IPIB\)](#) oversees the training requirements. Approved training options include:

- Iowa League of Cities: Offers online and in-person sessions.
- AEA Learning Online: Specialized modules for school board members.
- State Library of Iowa: Provides the "Open Meetings, Open Records: Compliance is the Law" course via Workday Learning.
- Iowa State University (ISU) Extension and Outreach: Offers workshops for local officials.

For more specific information on authorized training, visit the [IPIB Training Page](#).

CDI welcomes new Planning Coordinator Olivia Ziegler



Olivia Ziegler has joined the team at CDI as our new Planning Coordinator.

Olivia Ziegler has joined the team at Conservation Districts of Iowa, and will serve as the new Conservation Planning Coordinator. Ziegler will work with Iowa Soil & Water Conservation Districts to assist with the process of updating and improving their existing five-year Conservation Plans.

Ziegler is a 2024 graduate of the University of Iowa with a passion for urban planning, community development and the environment.

“Growing up in the Quad Cities, I saw first hand how vital soil and water quality are for our farmers, communities and everyday Iowans,” said she said. “I’m excited to start at CDI and work closely with Iowa’s soil and water conservation districts! I look forward to meeting and working with commissioners, leaders and individuals who are passionate about conservation!”

Ziegler will work with CDI Planning Coordinator Madison Conley, who has been with CDI for years in the Conservation Planning program. Conley and Ziegler will continue the hard work of previous planning coordinators at CDI.

“I’m incredibly excited for Olivia to get started as our new CDI Planning Coordinator. I know the Soil and Water Conservation Districts will greatly benefit from her perspective, energy and passion for planning,” said Conley. “I’m looking forward to mentoring and working alongside her as we continue supporting districts across Iowa.”



Conservation Planning Coordinator Madison Conley

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 and partners!