----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

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President's Report

By Sean Dolan

Harvest is quickly wrapping up around my area. Weather extremes in July and August caused a poor finish to our corn crop. It is disappointing to know the potential the crop had earlier in the year and then see all of the broken stalks and ultimately lower numbers on the yield monitor as the combine rolled through the fields. I find myself reflecting on the past growing season and preparing for next year and how I can improve. I take solace in the fact that the cover crops we planted in last spring did their job in keeping the soil in place. I have had numerous conversations with neighbors and friends who are sick when they encounter the rill erosion in some areas of their fields from the heavy downpours experienced earlier in the year.

Election day, and the end to all the political ads and flyers will be here next week! Wouldn't it be great if all the money spent trying to get the candidates elected could be used for conservation? It would be interesting to get a rough number of dollars spent and then equate that to how many acres of cover crops could be seeded, or saturated buffers installed. Thank you to all commissioners and potential commissioners who went out and got the signatures to be put on the ballot for a position that pays nothing. You truly have a passion for conservation and helping to improve your local communities.

I have about 5 hours of daily hog chores to do. I always wear Worktunes and have a podcast going to maybe learn some things or get a different perspective on issues. Some the podcasts I like are "The Singular Ag Podcast", "The Prairie Farm Podcast", "Cover Crop Strategies Podcast", "Nutrition Farming" by Graeme Sait, as well as some comedy podcast when I don't feel like thinking. I'm curious what podcasts you enjoy and think I could get some benefit from. Please let me know!

– Continued on Page 2

– Continued from Page 1

CDI is making plans for Spring Regionals in 2027, and Conservation Assistants will get a letter soon so that everyone can get their meetings in the calendar.

Sometimes experiments don't always work out. In this issue, there is picture of a buckwheat field I planted after harvesting rye. It took me more time than it should have (about four weeks!) to get it seeded. The freeze 2 weeks ago got the field and took out the buckwheat before it had time to produce seed. I still hope to see some agronomic benefit from seeding it and I will need to be on the ball after harvesting next year.

I hope you all get some time to be outside enjoying this beautiful weather and take in the marvelous autumn colors.

Sean

Executive Director's Report

By Dien Judge

Earlier in October, I joined with my colleagues from all around the country at the annual meeting of the Association of Conservation Executive Directors in Savannah, GA. The meeting provided an opportunity for us to get together and learn from each other about conservation efforts in other parts of the United States.

Whenever I meet with other Executive Directors, I always learn a lot from them. Each state does things a little differently, but we all have the same goals of promoting and improving soil and water conservation. This was also an excellent opportunity to network with some folks from our national organization, the National Association of Conservation Districts. There have been some staffing changes at NACD recently, and it was good to learn about that in person.

As the days get shorter and we enjoy the fall colors in the trees, it's time to start thinking about important events that will be taking place next year in 2027.

The CDI Scholarship committee has reviewed our scholarship application materials, and there will be a few changes for 2027. We will be sending out the scholarship application materials to Conservation Assistants next week, on Friday, Nov. 6. CDI staff have also been working on plans for 2027 Envirothon, as well as the plans for Spring Regionals. Districts hosting Spring Regionals will be receiving a letter soon with details about the schedule. Spring Regionals will be held the first and second weeks of March in 2027.

In other news, CDI is partnering with a large group of organizations in a grant funded program called PrairieLink. This program, formerly known as Horizon II, has officially relaunched its initiative. Funded through the USDA Advancing Markets for Producers program, CDI's role in the grant is to provide information to help farmers access assistance and cost reimbursement opportunities for start-up prairies. We are very excited about this opportunity to help spread the word and help landowners get connected with these resources.

The partnership's first kickoff meeting was on October 26-27 in Ames. This meeting gave us a better understanding of the program and a space to ask questions. We look forward to sharing additional information, resources, and opportunities with you all in the following months.

2026 Incubator Grant Opportunity Available for Conservation Districts

The Village & Wilderness Fund (VWF) has announced the 2026 Incubator Grant for conservation districts across Iowa.

The Village & Wilderness Fund is a nationwide nonprofit that helps restore natural habitats within communities. Through this grant, it provides seed funding, technical guidance, and peer support to organizations interested in launching local microhabitat programs that transform everyday spaces into ecologically healthy habitats. These spaces include yards, school grounds, and other small parcels.

During last year's grant cycle, the fund supported several conservation districts in Colorado, Oregon, and Washington.

A Habitat & Harvest participant celebrates a new yard sign in Yamhill County, OR.
Photo source: VWF, courtesy of Yamhill Soil and Water Conservation District

Grant recipients can receive a Planning Award of $1,000 or a Startup Award of $5,000. Receipt of a Planning Award does not guarantee a Startup Award.

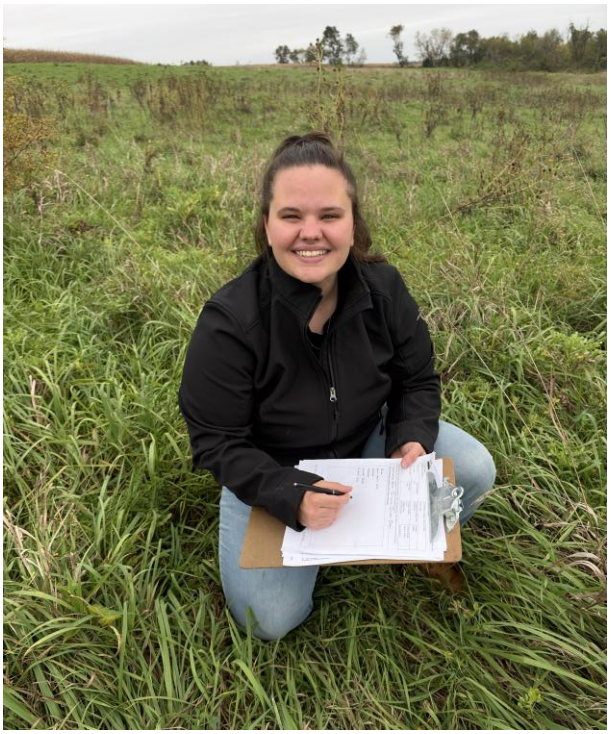
Applications are now being accepted for the 2026 Incubator Grant. The grant has a two-stage application process, beginning with a short initial application outlining the program idea. The deadline for the first stage is November 30.

To be eligible, applicants must be nonprofit organizations, public agencies, or community-based organizations with the capacity to administer a program. Conservation districts are encouraged to apply. Individual nonprofits may be considered on a case-by-case basis. For more information check out their website here.

Conservation Practices and Cover Crop Tour Available in November

ISU Northern Research Farm and the Boone River Watershed are teaming up for an edge-of-field conservation practice and cover crop tour on November 5 from 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. The event will begin at the ISU Northern Research Farm, where participants will be divided into groups and drive to four local sites to view edge-of-field practices and cover crops. Participants can speak with landowners about their reasons for using these practices and learn about available cost-share funding. Over lunch, Dr. Matt Helmers will discuss water quality. This event is open to the public and is free. You can register at ISU Extension.

CDI Employee Spotlight: Trinity Vonnahme



Trinity Vonnahme is the Land and Water Conservationist in region eight.

Trinity Vonnahme has been with CDI for nearly two years as a Land and Water Conservationist in Corning, Iowa. After earning her biology degree from Iowa State, she began her career as a traveling soil tester and now works for CDI. She also grew up helping her father on his farm, where he grew corn, soybeans, and other grains and sometimes raised livestock. Her father tends to take a conservation-minded approach to managing the farm in Carroll County, using no-till, cover crops, terraces, and tile drainage.

"It really wasn't something that you saw up there. When I'm talking to landowners down here, and whatnot, they're like, *Well I don't really see that up there*." Vonnahme said.

She loves the quiet of farm life. There are no busy highways and few nearby neighbors. You can be completely alone and experience something you cannot in the city: seeing hundreds of stars.

Her work varies from day to day. As a Land and Water Conservationist, her main job is to listen to farmers and help them develop the right plan for their land. Her favorite part is talking with farmers and helping them reach their goals.

"We run a lot of a lot of programs. You got EQIP, CSP, we do a lot of CRP. These landowners come in, sign an application, and the main question is, what do you want to do," Vonnahme said. She said farmers sometimes come in wanting to create ponds for livestock, install tile drainage and terraces, or even convert cropland to pasture. Many other practices are also available. The main goal is to help farmers achieve their long-term goals.

A very common practice is planting cover crops, and for good reasons. Cover crops are planted primarily to protect and improve the soil rather than for harvest. Their roots protect fields from wind, runoff, and weeds. They also feed microorganisms and keep nutrients in the soil and out of the water. With cover crop planning work finished for the season, she is turning to other programs. Her work always changes depending on the time of year, available resources, and, of course, the farmer.

Vonnahme said farmers often initiate the process, and then they schedule a meeting to begin the application. The meeting helps her and the landowner understand the farmer's goals and address any initial questions. This is when they get into the nitty-gritty details like tree removal.

They also check for historic or cultural sites, such as old farmhouses, churches, cemeteries, or schools, because their presence can delay an application. If no such sites are present, staff call the landowner, meet on the farm, and gather more details about the proposed work. The application is then entered into the planning program, where it receives a score. If the score is high enough, the project may receive funding and the work can begin.

Conservation work is not easy, but it can be very rewarding. Vonnahme said she is pleasantly surprised by how much work landowners have completed when they come in to have their projects certified. "They really got down to it, got it done, and made their operation better for themselves. And, you know, for future generations coming in," said Vonnahme.

2027 Iowa Envirothon is Underway

Conservation Districts of Iowa is preparing once again for the Iowa Envirothon competitions for Iowa youth. Iowa Envirothon consist of two competitions; a regional online competition and a state in-person competition. Next year's competitions will be held in the spring of 2027 and will be open to high school youth from all around the state of Iowa.

Through regional testing and state competition, students exhibit their knowledge in these four areas: forestry and prairies, aquatic ecology, wildlife, and soil and land use. Teams qualifying for the state contest also prepare an oral presentation on the year's current environmental topic. The program incorporates STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) principles, hands-on learning, and outdoor field experiences.

This year's Current Environmental Topic, "Soil Health Management: Agricultural Principles and Stewardship," explores soil health principles and their role in sustainable agriculture. Students will learn how soil functions as a living ecosystem, how management practices affect soil processes (nutrient cycling, water dynamics, agricultural sustainability), and how to evaluate and improve soil health on farms.

2026 Winners of Iowa Envirothon Naturally Selected from Decorah, Iowa.
From the left; Thomas Davis, Thatcher Brown, Atticus Raabe, Oskar Swanson and Jack Hammell.

Iowa Envirothon is a program of the National Conservation Foundation (NCF) Envirothon and is operated by CDI in partnership with the Iowa Conservation Education Coalition. NCF Envirothon is an environmental and natural resources conservation problem-solving, leadership, and academic competition for students in grades 9–12 or ages 14–19 across the United States, Canada, China, and Singapore.

Please make note of these important days:
Registration: November 1, 2026 – February 26, 2027
Online Regional testing: March 8, 2027 – March 26, 2027
State Iowa Envirothon competition: April 26, 2027, at Jester Park Nature Center, Granger, Iowa
International NCF-Envirothon: July 25 – 31, 2027, in Emmitsburg, Maryland

November 1st is when the resources and the study guides will be available on the website. We hope you'll reach out to your local school district and encourage them to get involved in Envirothon. Check out our website for more information here or contact Regan Davis, our program coordinator, at regan@cdiowa.org.

Brookside Labs and the World Wildlife Fund Neonics Update

Brookside Labs and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) have partnered up to do farm trials on neonicotinoid pesticides (neonics). Neonics are used to coat most seedings. According to WWF, there is nearly 100% non-organic corn in the US and more than 60% in soy. Brookside Labs and WWF are learning through their trials that perhaps pesticide-coated seeds may not be a one size fit all.

This is their second year of neonicotinoid seed treatment trials. The main theme they learned this year coined by Brooks Werner of Greene Crop Consulting is "Measure Before You Manage."

Whether it's pest pressure, fertility, crop performance, or soil conditions, management decisions should start with understanding what is happening in the field. A "Measure Before You Manage" mindset allows farmers to assess their farms and decide whether intervention is necessary. It means taking the time to observe, assess, and understand the situation before automatically reaching for another input.

Avoiding pesticides when possible is better for pollinators. With insect populations experiencing a consistent decline since the introduction of neonicotinoids. Because these chemicals can run off into surrounding areas rather than remaining on the treated seeds. Increasing farmer training and awareness can help encourage the transition to untreated seeds, reducing the amount of neonicotinoids entering the environment.

Hoppy Harvest at Synder Heritage Farm

Common milkweed (asclepias syriaca) is a native perennial plant in Iowa, used for attracting monarchs, bees, and butterflies.

The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) and the Iowa Wildlife Federation hosted a Hoppy Harvest event at Snyder Heritage Farm on October 14 in Elkhart, Iowa. Volunteers harvested native seeds to help diversify and expand the prairie ecosystem while reducing the cost of purchasing prairie seed for future projects.

For over 30 years, Snyder Heritage Farm has been slowly transitioning from a traditional farm back to a blend of prairie, oak savanna, woodland, and wetland ecosystems. INHF is a nonprofit organization whose mission is protecting and restoring Iowa's land, water and wildlife. Their main goal is to make nature accessible to everyone.

Iowa Wildlife Federation is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to inspire Iowans to protect wildlife and habitats in Iowa. Their vision for Iowa is abundant wildlife, well-managed public and private lands, clean water and healthy soils that can be enjoyed by current and future

– Continued on Page 7

– Continued from Page 6

generations through a multitude of outdoor recreational pursuits, including hunting, fishing and wildlife watching.

INHF is also sponsoring the Iowa Nature Summit on November 18–19 at Drake University's Olmsted Center in Des Moines, Iowa, and CDI will be attending. During the summit, Iowa's conservation leaders will gather to discuss various topics, including water quality, regenerative agriculture, public health, and more. If you are interested in upcoming events or volunteer opportunities, check them out here.

Pictured to the left: Synder Heritage Farm is now a 154-acre natural area and is stewarded by INHF.

Pictured below: Ryan Schmidt, Central Iowa Land Stewardship Director of INHF, demonstrating how to harvest prairie seeds to volunteers.

Pictured above: Milkweed bugs (Oncopeltus fasciatus) receive their name for having a preference for milkweed seeds.

1099 Threshold Change

There is a change to the threshold for cost share payments that will result in the State of Iowa issuing a 1099 for calendar year 2026. As part of legislation passed by the federal government, the threshold for requiring a 1099 to be issued for miscellaneous income reporting was increased from the previous amount of $600.00 to $2,000.00 for income received starting in 2026.

This means that for calendar year 2026, only farm cost-share claims paid in the amount of $2,000.00 or more may result in a 1099 being issued by the State. As a reminder, only payments to individuals, sole proprietors, partnerships, or LLCs filing as one of those three will receive a 1099.

Iowa Conservation Professionals Map

Finding conservation resources can be a challenge. The Iowa Conservation Professionals Map connects farmers and landowners with the local conservation advisors who can help site, fund, and implement practices that protect soil, water, and habitat resources. Many farmers are familiar with their local NRCS office, but some might not know that Iowa has a conservation workforce of 70+ non-federal employees who are ready to help farmers at no cost. Check out the conservation professional map, where Iowans can find trusted professionals in their area to take the next step in their conservation journey.

Link to Map: go.iastate.edu/FindMyCP

Secretary Naig Encourages Farmers to Plant Fall Cover Crops

Through doing so you could save money on crop insurance.

Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig is encouraging Iowa farmers to plant cover crops to improve water quality and soil health while saving money on next year's crop insurance premiums. Through the program, farmers who plant qualifying cover crops in the fall can receive a $5-per-acre discount, with no cap on acreage, on their 2027 premiums. Farmers can enroll this year and receive a discount next year. Online registration starts December 1, 2026, and closes January 22, 2027. Farmers can sign up to receive reminders about the upcoming enrollment.

To qualify, cover crop acres cannot be enrolled in other IDALS or NRCS cost-share programs. Certain insurance policies, including Whole-Farm Revenue Protection policies and policies covered through written agreements, may be excluded. Farmers should follow all farming practices required by their respective policies and work with their crop insurance agents to maintain eligibility. The Crop Insurance Discount Program supports the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy and helps farmers adopt sustainable conservation practices. To learn more about conservation and water quality efforts in Iowa, visit CleanWaterIowa.org.

Cover Crop and Grazing Field Day

Iowa Learning Farms will host a cover crop and grazing field day as part of their "Beyond the Basics: Advanced Cover Crop Series" in rural Epworth on November 12, from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. The event is free to farmers and landowners and includes a complimentary meal.

The speakers includes Shelby Gruss, extension forage specialist with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, who will share about the opportunities that cover crops offer as livestock forage. Scott Hendricks, Conservation Agronomist with Dubuque County Watersheds, will also discuss their efforts to promote cover crop use and the resources available to help implement cover crops on agricultural land. Lastly, Jack Smith will share his experiences utilizing cover crops as a forage and grazing source for his cattle in rural Dubuque County.

Iowa Learning Farms' mission is to build a culture of conservation by encouraging adoption of conservation practices since 2004.
Photo Sources: Courtesy of Iowa Learning Farms

The field day will be held at the Smith Farm, located at 26129 Tivoli Ln, Epworth, IA. Reservations are required to ensure adequate space and food. For accommodations and to RSVP, please contact Harting at 515-294-8912 or ilf@iastate.edu by November 5. Attendees will also be entered in a drawing for Iowa State University Prairie Strips honey.