----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

November always seems like the most frantic time of the year on our farm. We are trying to get harvest equipment cleaned up and put away, haul and apply the manure, make sure the hog barns are ready for winter, and racing Mother Nature to get all the cover crops seeded. The light at the end of the tunnel is getting brighter and it will be a huge relief when we fold up the drill and pull out of the last field.

The hottest topic and area of concern in Eastern Iowa, currently, is the proposed detonation of the lead azide stores in Middleton. The risk and long-lasting ramifications to all living organisms who are in the fallout zone are real and serious. I wish we had answers to the how and why we got to this point, as well as where we go from here. This single event and its potential impact have galvanized Iowans in demanding the Army to do better. Large, one-time events get the headlines, while slow, miniscule events like a heavy downpour fly under the radar. Add up all the soil and wind erosion that has happened over the past 60 years, and I would argue that has been far more destructive to our environment than the detonation will be. It is the frog in the pot of water scenario, and it is our job as commissioners to try and keep the water from boiling. The good news is there are great opportunities, and increasing knowledge to implement conservation practices and have success while doing so!

During the week of Thanksgiving, I like to reflect on the blessings I have been granted. My wife, Sara, is my greatest blessing. Her steadfast love and encouragement makes me a better man. I am thankful for all my family. I am thankful that I get to wake up and do what I love every day in the greatest place on earth!

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I am thankful to have met so many of you, and that we have a common purpose to help make this a better place for living organisms. Happy Thanksgiving to all of you!

Sean

Executive Director's Report

By Dien Judge

As the Thanksgiving holiday approaches, it's a good time to reflect on the past year and think about our many blessings here in the state of Iowa. We have the best farmland in the world, and we have many, many good people in our state who want to preserve and protect that priceless resource for future generations.

I'm thankful for an awesome staff here at CDI. I won't list all of their names here, because of space constraints, but each and every member of the CDI team deserves recognition for the work they're doing this year. These folks are serving the CDI mission: to inform, educate, and lead Iowans through our local Soil and Water Conservation Districts to promote conservation of natural resources.

I'm also thankful for the strong partnership we have in Iowa among other agencies and organizations. Our staff work with partners at USDA-NRCS and the Iowa Department Agriculture and Land Stewardship and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. All of these folks work smoothly together to achieve our goals. It's really pretty amazing.

And thinking of our CDI staff–several members of the CDI staff joined me at the Iowa Nature Summit at Drake University this month. Thank you to the many Nature Summit guests who came to our table and said "hello." We appreciate your support! This event brought together many champions of conservation for a two-day conference, and it is inspiring to hear the success stories of these conservation leaders. One of the champions honored at the summit was our own CDI Secretary, Mary Ellen Miller. Congratulations on the well-deserved award. We also heard from a panel of Iowa legislators, each of whom shared their ideas about the upcoming legislative session.

With many new legislators elected this year, and a new administration in the governor's office, there are some real opportunities for our leaders to make meaningful, positive change for our soil and water in 2027. CDI will work to build relationships with the new state and federal elected officials–and we will take our CDI Resolutions along with us–so your voice will be heard.

We're also thankful for the many donors who have given generous donations to our CDI Scholarship fund. We give out $9,000 in scholarships each year, and we're pretty close to meeting our fundraising goal for this year. We still need to raise some more, so please consider a donation. Our scholarships go toward supporting the conservation leaders of the future.

As we look ahead at the calendar of events, there are several important dates to keep in mind. On Monday, Dec. 14, we will be sending out the 2027 Resolutions Process documents. Please start thinking about potential resolutions to discuss. Spring Regionals dates are set, and plans are coming together. Spring Regionals will be held between March 2 and 10. Please make every effort to attend your Spring Regional meeting. These meetings are for all commissioners and assistant commissioners, as well as our partner organizations. Spring Regionals are not just a CDI event, they are an event for our conservation partnership—where we share ideas and make important decisions.

I hope everyone has a safe and happy Thanksgiving, enjoy the time with your family and friends.

Conservation Practices and Cover Crop Tour at Research Farm



Angie Rieck-Hinz, a field agronomist, holding turnips cover crops from ISU Northern Research Farm.

ISU Northern Research Farm and the Boone River Watershed teamed up for an edge-of-field conservation practice and cover crop tour on November 5. The event began at the ISU Northern Research Farm, where participants were divided into groups and drove to four local sites to view edge-of-field practices and cover crops.

Participants got the opportunities to speak to conservation experts about reasons for using these practices and learn about available cost-share funding. The conservation site visited were wetland, oxbow wetland, saturated buffered, and bioreactors. Over lunch, Dr. Matt Helmers, Director of the Iowa Nutrient Research Center, discuss water quality. Lastly CDI's Vice President TC Loving made closing remarks about the importance of conservation work and how we all have the right to preserve the land and leave it better than it was given to us.

2027 Poster Contest Information Available



Coy Creveling was one of the 2026 poster contest winners from Ringgold District. Courtesy of: Ringgold SWCD

The 2027 Iowa Conservation Poster Contest is once again open to Iowa youth, from kindergarten through 12th grade. Participants this year will make posters using the theme from National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) 2027 Stewardship Week, "From Source to Sea: Every Drop Has A Journey." This theme explores watersheds and how what happens upstream can affect water quality downstream. We are very excited for the creativity that these future conservationists will bring to their posters.

The contest starts at the district level: winners advance to the regional level, and then to the state level. All state-winning posters are submitted to the NACD Conservation

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Poster Contest with the chance for the student's art to be displayed as part of a national conservation outreach initiative and recognized at NACD's annual meeting.

Each year, the winning posters highlight the work of conservation districts and their state conservation associations, auxiliaries, and agencies in protecting and enhancing natural resources.

The poster contest is open to public, private and home-schooled students. For complete rules and information about the contest, please visit the CDI website here.

CDI Attends Iowa Nature Summit

CDI had the opportunity to sponsor the Iowa Nature Summit, held at Drake University's Olmsted Center on November 18–19. The summit brings together people working to protect, restore, and strengthen Iowa's natural heritage, with topics varying from day to day.

The two-day event brought together a variety of conservation leaders, including landowners, farmers, policymakers, environmental journalists, and more. Day one began with opening remarks from Neil Hamilton, emeritus professor of law at Drake University, who gave a powerful speech about preserving the land.

Throughout the day, speakers covered topics including technology, creating a bird-friendly Iowa, and data centers. Panels and networking breaks offered opportunities to ask questions and get to know like-minded leaders. The first day concluded with a reception honoring the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF).

The final day of the summit featured speeches about policy opportunities, regenerative agriculture, and the next generation's perspectives on today's trials and tribulations. During lunch, the summit presented the 2026 Iowa Nature Champion Awards. Ray Young Bear read a hopeful poem about the beauty of nature, and the summit recognized leaders in the field, including CDI's secretary, Mary Ellen Miller. The event closed with final remarks from Professor Hamilton.

Conferences like these allow CDI to learn more about conservation practices and the people behind them. They also allow us to connect with prospective commissioners who will play an active role in shaping CDI's resolutions. Lastly, they give us the opportunity to promote our youth-oriented initiatives, including Iowa Envirothon, the poster contest, and scholarships.



Mary Ellen Miller, Secretary of CDI, gives her acceptance speech during the Iowa Nature Summit.

CDI Employee Spotlight: Grant Tiede



Grant Tiede, Wetland Engineering Technician, ice fishing on Waubay Lake in South Dakota.

Grant Tiede has been with CDI since early 2025 as a Wetland Engineering Technician in Spirit Lake, Iowa. Tiede studied natural resources and law enforcement. After graduating, he became less interested in the policing side of conservation work, so he started searching on conservation job boards and found CDI. His role at CDI is to survey, design, and facilitate the implementation of wetland restoration practices, such as building embankments to hold more water or doing shallow-water excavations. His daily work varies and he loves it.

"One thing I like about my job is that my days change day to day. One day, I'll be out in the field with the GPS unit, surveying the ground just to get an idea of what's out there," he said. "And then, I'll go and take that back into the office and use AutoCAD or design software to come up with a plan. Most of the time, it's getting more water on the landscape. Whether that's building a dam or just digging out a pond."

Once the design is finished, bids go out to contractors. After contracts are in place, construction can begin. Tiede oversees construction on site and handles quality assurance for the project.

Designing wetlands involves both creativity and math. Tiede describes his work as a mix of ecology and mathematics.

"What we're looking for is water level and how fast the water is moving in an area. So that's a lot of mathematics, and that'll kind of give us the baseline of what we need to do out in an area," Tiede said. "The other part of it comes from just knowing how to hold the most water in the landscape. That's where creativity comes in, designing different pool shapes."

When working on an easement for people who enjoy duck hunting, Tiede can use his creativity to design areas that attract ducks and other wildlife. As a hunter himself, some of these design choices come intuitively.

"Our designs come from either just stuff learned in school or stuff we just know as hunters. [For example] 18 to 24 inches of water are what ducks really like to land and sit in, and then the fact that they don't like to see each other when they're nesting, so we'll design different little hideaways they can go off into," he said.

Other aspects of the job were less intuitive. And he said he learned so much from being a Wetland Engineering Technician on the job and just working side-by-side with the farmers.

"[I learned] the whole world of agriculture. I grew up in South Dakota, so I was surrounded by it a lot, but just the ins and outs of one farmer's plan [and] the struggles they go through," he said. He also discussed that he was introduced to the Farm Bill through working as Wetland Engineering Technician at CDI.

Tiede noted that many farmers are conservation-minded and willing to do what is best for the landscape rather than follow familiar practices. He recalled visiting a farmer in Palo Alto County to look at previous restorations. The farmer shared a story about growing up and how much his family enjoyed duck hunting.

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"That kind of made me feel good. [It's] good to know that these people really do love what we do with the land and get enjoyment out of those areas," Tiede said.

He is excited to be handling many of his current projects independently, with implementation of these plans happening over the next few months. He has also received a few new projects in the Missouri River Valley, which is typically outside his team's area.

Tiede enjoys nature and is happy that his work at CDI allows him to spend so much time outdoors. "It's a super fun and fulfilling job. I would recommend it to anyone that's conservation minded," he said.



Shaffer Ridgeway, District Conservationist of Black Hawk County, was honored for The Healthiest State Annual Award.

Featured Farmer: Shaffer Ridgeway

Shaffer Ridgeway was one of four people who won the Iowa Healthiest State Annual Awards 2026. This initiative recognizes Iowans whose leadership and dedication are helping create healthier communities throughout the state. Ridgeway was recognized for connecting healthy land, nutritious food and stronger communities through conservation, farming and education.

He started his career with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) as an intern in 1998. He has served in many positions, including Soil Conservationist and Black Special Emphasis Program Manager, and he serves on the boards of directors for Practical Farmers of Iowa and Iowa Farmers Union. He has been the District Conservationist in Waterloo, Iowa (Black Hawk County), for the past 24 years.

Ridgeway also has a family-owned farming business called Southern Goods LLC, named in honor of his southern roots. He grew up in Alabama watching his father run a small cattle operation. He uses the wisdom from his father and his formal education to bring high-quality Southern vegetables to Midwestern markets.

Ridgeway uses crop rotation, low till, and cover crops as conservation practices on his 15 acres. Although the farm is not officially certified organic, he follows most, if not all, organic practices. He hopes his efforts inspire other farmers to find a way to do more on their land. However, he thinks the best thing you can do for your farm is learn it. His motto is: don't adopt what he's doing; adapt your practices to improve your soil.

He is very grateful for the award, but it is not the reason he does conservation work. He does it because he wants to leave the land better than he found it. He believes healthy soil produces nutrient-dense food, and he loves helping people. He encourages everyone to remember their why and not focus too much on accolades.

"I'm appreciative that people know my name. I'm appreciative that people call me from all over the country, asking me questions. They invited me to come speak at their conferences, and all those things are great—everybody wants to be appreciated," he said. "You have to know your why, though, because if you don't know your why, somebody will come along and talk you out of it."

Iowa Envirothon Registration Now Available

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; Oskar Swanson, Thatcher Brown, Thomas Davis, Atticus Raabe, 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

The resources and the study guides are now 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.

Iowa Envirothon now has an up-to-date Facebook page! Be sure to follow the page for the latest announcements, competition information, photos and more. Stay connected and keep up with everything happening in Iowa Envirothon!

CDI 2027 Scholarships Information Available

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

High school seniors graduating in Iowa's Class of 2027 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. 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 here: 2027 Conservation Scholarship Application

The rules document is available here: 2027 Rules for Conservation Scholarships

Please note this important timeline for the scholarship:

- February 5, 2027: Applicants must submit completed applications to their county SWCD office (based on county of residence).
- March 12, 2027: Each SWCD selects one county winner to forward to their CDI Regional Director.
- March 26, 2027: The Regional Director selects one regional winner to advance to the state-level competition.
- April 2, 2027: A panel of CDI Officers and members of the CDI Scholarship Committee reviews regional finalists and selects state winners.
- April 30, 2027: CDI notifies local SWCD offices of the winning applicants. Local offices will then contact the students, their school, and local media with results.

Please submit all applications through your local Soil and Water Conservation District office. To find your local office, visit the USDA Service Center Locator and select your county on the map. We also encourage you to donate to CDI so we can continue with these amazing scholarships and other youth outreach. You can receive more information here. Please also consider donating to CDI so we can continue these amazing scholarships and other youth outreach.

IFC SEEKING HYDROSTATION HOST

Iowa Flood Center (IFC) is seeking locations in select Iowa counties to host one of its hydrologic weather stations, known as hydrostations. IFC hydrostations support flood forecasting and drought monitoring efforts. There is no cost to host a station, and the IFC team handles all installation and ongoing maintenance. Data collected by the stations are publicly available through the Iowa Flood Information System (IFIS) and are updated hourly.

Counties currently under consideration:

1. Buena Vista
2. Cass
3. Cherokee
4. Clay
5. Decatur
6. Dickinson
7. Lyon
8. Madison
9. Osceola
10. Pottawattamie
11. Sioux
12. Union
13. Wayne
14. Woodbury

Please email Kate Giannini, IFC Program Manager, at kate-giannini@uiowa.edu for any question or concerns.



PrairieLink
A Roeslein Alternative Energy Program

TURN UNDERPERFORMING ACRES INTO LASTING LAND VALUE

Every landowner has ground that doesn't perform the way it should. Low spots, slopes and field edges can take time and effort without returning much. Over time, those acres become harder to justify. Finding a more productive use for those acres can create value from land that often delivers inconsistent returns.

A PROFITABLE APPROACH

PrairieLink is a Roeslein Alternative Energy Program that helps landowners establish native prairie on marginal or degraded acres. Through the USDA Advancing Markets for Producers grant and other funding sources, PrairieLink pays for the long-term conversion of these acres. While funding structures may vary by region and landowner, Roeslein Alternative Energy works collaboratively with each participant to develop a plan that aligns with your land, goals and available incentives.

What PrairieLink Can Provide

Lucrative Cost-Share Potential

Roeslein Alternative Energy reimburses up to 100% of the prairie establishment costs. Additionally, in the Grand River Basin area, landowners receive milestone payments distributed throughout the first year of the contract, providing an early return on land that often underperforms. Throughout the contract, you keep ownership of your land and continue to make decisions about how the prairie is used.

Additional Value Over Time

Income is the starting point. For landowners who value wildlife and land stewardship, prairie naturally improves land value over time through:

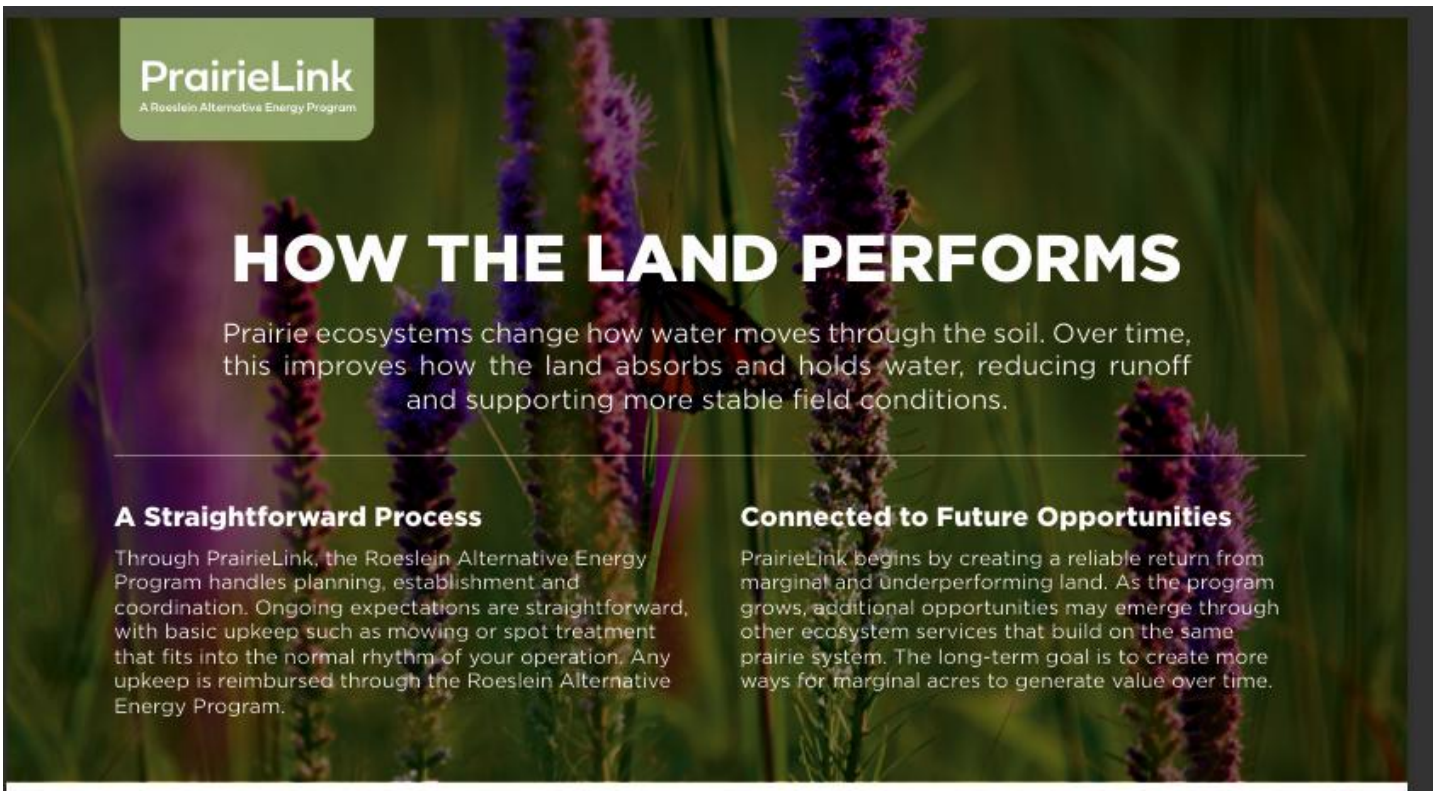
- Improved soil structure
- Reduced erosion
- Improved water quality
- Restored habitat for wildlife, including deer, quail, pheasants and pollinators

WHERE THE PROGRAM BEST FITS

This approach is designed for row crop, pasture or recreational use landowners with:

- Marginal or underperforming acres
- Poor drainage areas
- Slopes and difficult ground
- Buffer zones and field edges

If you own at least 100 acres and some are not delivering consistent returns, please reach out to see if you are a fit.



HOW THE LAND PERFORMS

Prairie ecosystems change how water moves through the soil. Over time, this improves how the land absorbs and holds water, reducing runoff and supporting more stable field conditions.

A Straightforward Process

Through PrairieLink, the Roeslein Alternative Energy Program handles planning, establishment and coordination. Ongoing expectations are straightforward, with basic upkeep such as mowing or spot treatment that fits into the normal rhythm of your operation. Any upkeep is reimbursed through the Roeslein Alternative Energy Program.

Connected to Future Opportunities

PrairieLink begins by creating a reliable return from marginal and underperforming land. As the program grows, additional opportunities may emerge through other ecosystem services that build on the same prairie system. The long-term goal is to create more ways for marginal acres to generate value over time.

Deployed in Real Conditions

This program is established on land across specific counties in northern Missouri and southern Iowa, within the Grand River Basin. It is designed for real conditions, where weather, soil and land use vary from year to year.

Available in these counties:

Northern Missouri:
Adair, Daviess, Grundy, Harrison, Linn, Mercer, Putnam, Sullivan

Southern Iowa:
Appanoose, Decatur, Ringgold, Wayne

What You Gain

- Elimination of annual input costs on ground that doesn't break even
- Continued ownership and practical use of the land
- Improved land and soil conditions over time
- Additional wildlife benefits

Grounded in Real Partnerships

PrairieLink is operated by the Roeslein Alternative Energy Program, a global engineering company, and supported by partnerships that include prairie experts, academia and real-world stakeholders. The team that implements the PrairieLink program applies engineering discipline while staying responsive to what the land is telling us.

A Conversation to Start

If you're looking at parts of your land that are not performing the way they should, this may be worth exploring. We can walk the ground together and look at what makes sense.

OUR PARTNERS

Missouri Prairie Foundation · The Nature Conservancy · IAWA Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance · USDA · NRCS · Mizzou University of Missouri · Pheasants Forever · Quail Forever · Ducks Unlimited