

MILLS COUNTY

# SWCD FY2021

ANNUAL REPORT



*District Annual Report — August 17, 2022*



# HELLO From the Director

**Susan Kozak**, Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship – Division of Soil Conservation and Water Quality

Each year as I write this article, I find it a time for reflection and anticipation. I am very proud of the conservation work happening across the state with our Division of Soil Conservation and Water Quality staff, the local voice of the Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners and our interactions with diverse partners.

One of the many goals we face for water quality in the state is constructing more wetlands in targeted areas. Recently, we set aside time for a Wetland Work Group where 26 of our staff members from across the state reviewed our wetland development process, identified barriers and needs, and proposed recommendations on how to move forward toward our goal of building more wetlands every year. Now the real work begins as we review the ideas and work toward implementation.

We have had our time of reflection and now I am anticipating what the future

could look like for conservation. I am in this position, and this Division, because I truly love our natural resources and am passionate about doing everything we can to preserve them for future generations. As I drive across the state, I am always looking around and excited when I see a conservation practice in action and equally motivated when I see an area that could be improved. My challenge to everyone would be to follow our lead and take a moment to pause and assess your conservation challenges and needs. Where could you make one change to improve soil and water quality in your area? Whether you are urban or rural, have an acreage or a balcony herb garden, there are countless ways we can benefit our soil and water resources. And, if you need ideas, reach out to your local USDA office and we can assist.

## BRITTANY ROCKWELL,

Conservation Assistant (CA) with Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS)

Hello, my name is Brittany Rockwell. I joined the NRCS Field Office as a Conservation Assistant (CA) with Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) in February of 2022. I was raised in Wisconsin, but always knew I wanted to call Iowa home. I attended Iowa State University and graduated with my bachelor's degree in 2018.

My husband and I met at Iowa State and married in 2019. He received a work offer from an engineering firm in Council Bluffs and we decided to move back to his home area. We have twin daughters Macie and Vienna, a pet rabbit Theo, and a cat Peaches. When I am not at work or chasing around two toddlers, I love supporting the Veteran community here in Southwest Iowa.

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## Record Program Obligations Despite COVID Limitations

**Jon Hubbert**, State Conservationist, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Iowa

I hope your 2022 is off to a great start! It's interesting how the temperatures outside seem to turn bitter cold in Iowa as soon as the calendar changes. Thanks to above average temperatures and below average precipitation last fall, District, IDALS and NRCS staff were able to accomplish a lot. Offices kept busy in the field designing practices, working on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts, and helping producers plan their conservation goals.

Our accomplishments over the past year showcase the importance of the conservation partnership in Iowa. The collaborative efforts of local, state, and federal employees and other partners in our field offices helped NRCS contract to treat 323,000 agricultural land acres with conservation practices through various Farm Bill programs. We provided a record \$83 million in conservation assistance to Iowa farmers last year. Combine that with the nearly \$15 million in state cost-share practices obligated to Iowa farmers and other funding assistance through local soil and water conservation districts and it's safe to say we topped the \$100 million mark this past year in conservation funding to Iowa producers – and that doesn't include CRP.

The NRCS total included nearly \$2 million in cover crops for Derecho storm recovery and more than \$25 million in new floodplain easements stemming from damage caused during the 2019 western Iowa floods. Cover crops were once again our most popular practice. We obligated \$8.1 million through 889 new Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contracts covering 152,643 acres.

We also obligated nearly \$20 million in new five-year Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts last year. Through CSP, Iowa farmers will treat natural resource concerns on more than 186,000 acres. Our staff also wrote 10,245 conservation plans last year, covering nearly 800,000 agricultural acres.

NRCS Staffing and **Reorganization** Despite ongoing staffing shortages and significant COVID limitations in our field offices, I am proud to report we increased our overall conservation implementation in fiscal year 2021. We are still working to fill some key District Conservationist positions – some that have been advertised multiple times! We appreciate the help, collaboration, and teamwork from our Iowa conservation partners.

As most of you know, we began implementing a staff reorganization two years ago, which just happened to coincide with

the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to several factors, such as the slow pace of increasing space in resource team offices, filling critical staff vacancies, and USDA COVID protocols limiting face-to-face interaction with producers, the reorganization we envisioned is taking longer to fully implement than we had hoped.

With that said, we are seeing glimpses of reorganization success in various locations. One example is in Williamsburg, where Resource Team Leader Kate Timmerman says having a district conservationist in every county is allowing for a reliable local point of contact and a dedicated office manager.

"This has improved customer relationships and availability of an NRCS Line Officer," said Timmerman. "The team approach has also provided us with more staff who are dedicated to four counties. The team concept allows the staff to shift to the areas of higher workload, letting us get more, high quality, conservation on the ground."

Although we know every field office and resource team is different, we are hoping our reorganization helps provide more consistency and streamlining of program and conservation practice implementation.

USDA Goals and **Priorities** Lastly, I would like to share some of USDA's goals and priorities for 2022:

- Build on our progress to integrate climate change into programs and services.
- Embrace diversity, equity, inclusion, and access in the workplace and integrate equity into decision-making for programs and services.
- Create more and better market opportunities by prioritizing processing and distribution capacity, creating open and competitive markets, strengthening local food systems, and investing in organic and other emerging opportunities.
- Invest in bold solutions that enhance food safety, improve nutrition programs, and reduce food and nutrition insecurity.
- Make USDA a great place to work for everyone by building a culture that welcomes and respects everyone, and that encourages everyone to reach their highest potential.

NRCS will be supporting these priorities, where our mission area is involved.





## IDALS Field Office Staff Continue to Effectively Deliver Conservation Programs

**By Will Myers,** Field Services Bureau Chief - IDALS Division of Soil Conservation and Water Quality

Over the past several weeks I've been working to summarize and assess another fiscal year of state cost share expenditures and we continue to see strong interest for our conservation programs. Demand for state funded programs continues to exceed budgeted allocations, and our local staff continue to work one-on-one with farmers and landowners to find the best solutions for their respective conservation goals. This is encouraging news as we continue to work through challenges associated with the ongoing pandemic and resulting impacts to our staff and field offices.

These conservation program delivery successes could not happen without the contributions and dedication from our field office staff. I've been fortunate to spend a significant amount of time this year traveling to our field offices to meet with staff and discuss how they have been able to effectively adapt to our current work environment. I've been pleased to

hear how we continue to find new and innovative ways to communicate and interact with our customers to deliver program related services, technical assistance and minimize impacts whenever possible. We have also brought on a number of new staff to our team over the past year and have worked hard to find effective methods to train and educate them on their roles and importance to the collective conservation program partnership.

While challenges remain, we continue to work effectively with our customers to get conservation practices on the ground. Much of this success can be directly attributed to the expertise and professionalism of our staff and their ability to communicate and work effectively with local conservation partners and commissioners. Thank you to all of our dedicated staff, commissioners and conservation partners for your continued hard work and dedication and I look forward to our continued work this year.



## Fellow Iowans

**Mike Naig,** Iowa Secretary of Agriculture

We have a lot to celebrate and be thankful for this year! I'm proud of the conservation work that's being done across the state.

Working alongside our public and private partners, the Department has achieved some important conservation milestones in 2021. We completed the 100th CREP-funded wetland this fall; we now have 110 known water quality wetlands in Iowa. We're accelerating the rate at which conservation practices are being added. Working with our public-private conservation partners, we've added at least 41 saturated buffers and 15 bioreactors to the landscape in 2021. There are more than 40 state-funded, locally-led wetland projects under construction to date. A recent survey shows farmers and landowners are now planting more than 2 million acres of cover crops in Iowa, and the use of conservation tillage and no-till practices are up too. These stats are important because changes to the landscape and soil management practices lead to positive changes in water quality locally and downstream.

We have made progress in scaling up the number of soil health and water quality practices in Iowa but there's still work to do to achieve the goals outlined in the Nutrient Reduction Strategy. We're look-

ing for more farmers and landowners who want to work alongside us to make meaningful changes to the landscape, beginning with their fields.

I recognize that we need additional financial and technical resources to continue scaling-up soil health and water quality projects. During the 2021 Legislative Session, I asked the Iowa Legislature for additional funding to continue to supporting the state's water quality efforts. The Iowa Legislature passed and Gov. Kim Reynolds approved an additional \$320 million of funding through 2039.

Because Iowa has been able to demonstrate the success of our ongoing soil health and water quality projects, we've been awarded significant federal funding through USDA and EPA. We're leading or participating in 13 USDA-funded regional conservation partnership programs, and we've received more than \$24 million in federal funding for water quality projects in 2021. These federal funds help us better leverage state and private dollars so we can add even more practices to the landscape.

Thank you, to all the farmers, landowners and conservation partners, who are working alongside us to help advance soil health and water quality in Iowa and downstream.

## HELC Compliance: Back to the Basics

Our USDA Service Centers serve many functions across Southwest Iowa, including technical and financial advice for practices like terraces, waterways, and basins. We also promote soil health practices that include cover crops, no-till, and nutrient management. One of our functions that can sometimes get overlooked and can be somewhat confusing is our Highly Erodible Land Conservation (HELC) compliance provisions of the Farm Bill.

The Food Security Act of 1985 was the first farm bill with a specific title devoted to conservation programs and policies (this farm bill also included the first Conservation Reserve Program and wetland and sodbuster provisions). After 1985, persons requesting certain USDA program benefits were required to follow HELC provisions to remain eligible for these benefits. All farm bills since 1985 have contained conservation titles and each has been written as amendments to that bill.

So, what are these provisions and how do they apply to us in Southwest Iowa? If NRCS has determined a field as HELC (based on the predominant soils of the field), which most of our land is, here

in Mills County, then producers are required to follow an approved conservation system on that field. NRCS will develop a Conservation Plan for that field that will address sheet and rill erosion, which could include practices such as reduced tillage, contour farming, and terraces. The Conservation Plan will also address all ephemeral erosion, which could include practices such as grassed waterways, field borders, and critical area seedings. When a producer signs the form AD-1026 for the FSA, they are self-certifying that they are following these provisions.

How does USDA ensure that producers are complying with the farm bill HELC provisions? This is primarily through the NRCS "spot checks" or status reviews that are conducted each spring/summer. A tract could be subjected to a review for a couple of different reasons. It could be randomly selected nationally, by the FSA, it could be added through the whistleblower process, or it could be added if something was found through another field review or from an aerial photography review. A status review usually consists

of walking the tract (the producer will be asked to accompany the NRCS on the review) and comparing the practices implemented to the practices that are required by the Conservation Plan. When a potential violation is found, the producers involved are given the opportunity to meet with FSA/NRCS staff to discuss and find a solution.

These are just the basics of HELC compliance provisions and how they relate to us here in Southwest Iowa. If you have questions about the process or would like to dive deeper into the weeds, give our USDA Service Center a call or stop by. It's always a good idea to review your Conservation Plans on each tract that you farm.





# MILLS COUNTY SWCD

F.Y. 2022 REPORT ON ANNUAL USE OF DISTRICT FUNDS  
July 1, 2021 - June 30, 2022

## RECEIPTS

Comm. Expense Income	\$1,956.44
Transferred From MM	\$1,000.00
NACD Grant funds	\$18,304.00
Prior FY21 Commissioner Income	\$2,750.00
Voided Checks	\$744.60
<b>TOTAL RECEIPTS</b>	<b>\$24,755.04</b>

## EXPENDITURES

Commissioner Expenses	\$2,114.94
Miscellaneous	\$50.00.00
Prior FY Comm Expenses	\$27.14
Pony Creek inspections	\$800.00
Scholarship	\$500.00
Voided Checks	\$744.60
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$4,236.68</b>

	\$888.89
Receipts	\$24,755.04
Total Receipts	\$25,643.93
Less Total Expenditures	\$4,236.68
Balance June 30, 2022	\$21,407.26

# Congratulations to 2022 Graduates



**Amara Orth**



**Shelby Hindman**

Congratulations to Amara Orth of Lewis Central High and Shelby Hindman of East Mills High on receiving the 2022 Mills SWCD Scholarships.

## CURT CASHATT CONSTRUCTION

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& WATERWAYS



If you would like to make a donation to the Mills County SWCD, please fill out the information below and return it along with your donation to the address below. Thank you for your support!

Mills County Soil & Water Conservation District  
204 West 5th Street, PO Box 190  
Malvern, IA 51551-0190

**Mills**



(Please make checks payable to Mills County SWCD)

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City, State, Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_



"We would like to take the opportunity to say thank you to all the landowners and producers in Mills County who make their land a priority. We are so grateful you have and continue to make a difference in our natural resources. We are excited to share information about our district. Conserving our natural resources takes continued efforts from everyone and the Mills SWCD Commissioners appreciate all you do to conserve the land for future generations." Our staff is always happy and willing to visit with you so stop by the office at 204 West 5th Street, Malvern. You can also find us on Facebook under Mills SWCD.



To assist producers of Mills County by providing technical and financial assistance to help reduce soil erosion, improve water quality and soil health on the land.

CONTACT  
**JIM HUGHES**  
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