



United States Department of Agriculture

# IOWA CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Winter 2020

## TRI-STATE CULTIVATING FUTURE LEADERS PROGRAM KICKS OFF

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## HOW SOIL LOSS IS TOLERATED BEGINNING TO CHANGE

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NATURAL RESOURCES  
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# a **Message**

from the

# State Conservationist



*Kurt Simon,  
State Conservationist*

As we flip the calendar to March – another month closer to spring and warmer weather – it also signifies that our staff restructuring is upon us.

After a few years of research and planning, it is with great anticipation and anxiousness that our reorganization begins. For some, it means major work changes. For others, it may

not change what you're doing or where you're working. Either way, I am confident that our reorganization will be the best solution for Iowa NRCS moving forward.

I enjoyed getting to see most of you in January with members of our leadership team, as we conducted 25 meetings throughout the state to talk about the reorganization. After reflecting on the meetings, we feel like most are now comfortable with where and what they are going to be doing. Most questions were about site-specific details. We have tried to be as transparent as possible throughout the process, and I feel like staff had

time to digest their situation and can now focus on the future.

Actual physical changes will take time for most offices. Resource Teams will begin working together on March 16, but due to office space limitations many team members will be unable to move to resource team locations immediately. Patience and good communication will be vital to a smooth transition.

I know 2020 presents a lot of challenges for our staff – with reorganization, new planning and program tools, and implementing the 2018 Farm Bill with new programs and processes. If you have concerns or frustrations, reach out to leadership. We know it's going to be a challenging year.

Sincerely,

Kurt Simon, State Conservationist

## IOWA CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

*Current Developments* is a product of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service in Des Moines, Iowa, published bimonthly by the Iowa NRCS Public Affairs Staff in cooperation with NRCS and partner agency employees from across the state.

### CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS STORIES AND PHOTOS

Please submit your Current Developments story ideas and photos to Public Affairs Specialist Jason Johnson at [jason.r.johnson@usda.gov](mailto:jason.r.johnson@usda.gov). Past issues can be found at [https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/ia/people/employees/nrcs142p2\\_008273/](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/ia/people/employees/nrcs142p2_008273/).



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## ON DISPLAY: WAVERLY SOIL SURVEY OFFICE PRESENTS SOIL MONOLITH TO SCIENCE CENTER

The Science Center of Iowa's (SCI) new planned exhibit area that will highlight the state's historical prairie will include a soil monolith developed by MLRA Soil Project Leader Ryan Dermody, who works in the Waverly Soil Survey Office.

Dermody presented the soil monolith to former Iowa State University Professor and SCI Volunteer Ed Braun and SCI Director of Exhibits Allison Schwanebeck on Jan. 24 at the Science Center in Des Moines.

Dermody also developed a similar monolith for display at the Iowa NRCS State Office in Des Moines.

Dermody says he and Soil Scientist Lee Camp collected the Tama soil profiles from a field in Poweshiek County in November 2019.

To create the soil monolith, Dermody said, "I dried the soil for three weeks before applying a mixture of glue and water," he said. "It took about two weeks to apply three coats of glue, with drying time."

Dermody says the farm the soils were taken from no-tilled and applied cover crops for five consecutive years. "Owner Luke Bayer won a conservation award last year for his work with cover crops on this soil," he said.



*MLRA Soil Project Leader Ryan Dermody (right) with NRCS presented a soil monolith to Volunteer Ed Braun (middle) and Director of Exhibits Allison Schwanebeck with the Science Center of Iowa on Jan. 24 in Des Moines.*

Dermody also developed soil monoliths for Iowa State University, the National Soil Survey Center in Lincoln, NE, Hawkeye Community College in Waterloo, and other Iowa NRCS partners.

The Science Center of Iowa monolith is expected to be on display later in 2020 when the Science Center completes their entire prairie exhibit.

## CULTIVATING FUTURE LEADERS: NEW LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM KICKS OFF IN OMAHA

Eight Iowa NRCS employees are part of the inaugural tri-state Leadership Development Program (LDP), Cultivating Future Leaders (CFL), that kicked off in Omaha in early February with other attendees from Nebraska and Minnesota.

CFL is a 12-month training program conducted jointly by CI International. The program targets high performing, high potential NRCS employees at the GS-11 and GS-12 grade levels. The target audience is not limited to employees currently holding leadership positions.

The CFL program guarantees the participant a unique opportunity to develop leadership competencies, but there is no guarantee of future promotion or placement in a particular position. Participants from each state will work individually and in teams to accomplish their CFL training goals.

The 2020 CFL Iowa selectees include:

- » Ben Cottrell, District Conservationist in Ottumwa
- » Garrett Fish, Management Analyst in Des Moines
- » Holly Giombi, District Conservationist in Knoxville
- » Anand Hase, District Conservationist in Greenfield
- » Al Lange, Resource Conservationist in Des Moines
- » Bob Moser, District Conservationist in Fort Dodge
- » Lori Schnoor, District Conservationist in Maquoketa
- » Kate Timmerman, District Conservationist in Williamsburg

“We were very pleased with the response. We had over 20 qualified applicants for the program,” said State Conservationist Kurt Simon. “Unfortunately, we could not select everyone who applied. We look forward to working with the inaugural class of members and encourage those who are interested in the program to apply for future opportunities.”



The inaugural Iowa NRCS class of Cultivating Future Leaders include: (L to R) Lori Schnoor, Kate Timmerman, Ben Cottrell, Anand Hase, Al Lange, Garrett Fish, Holly Giombi and Bob Moser.

The training program includes three face-to-face training sessions, monthly webinars, executive coaching, a job shadow opportunity with a member of leadership, and a tour of National Headquarters in Washington, D.C.

The one-year program will culminate with an in-person training and graduation event in February 2021.

For more information about the Cultivating Future Leaders program, contact Assistant State Conservationist for Management and Strategy Jaia Fischer at [jaia.fischer@usda.gov](mailto:jaia.fischer@usda.gov) or 515-284-4525.

## DRILLIN' TIME: USER-FRIENDLY RIG WILL GET USED MORE

A new SIMCO 2800 drill rig was purchased and delivered to NRCS at the Ankeny Field Office on Feb. 28.

The new drill rig replaces the 15-year-old more sophisticated rig that required a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) and extensive training to operate.

The new rig is mounted on a Ford F550 truck. And although the new rig weighs about 16,000 pounds, it will be much easier to operate and maneuver than the old rig.

Joe Thompson, State Geologist, says the new drill rig will be used to perform a variety of subsurface geotechnical investigations for conservation practices such as dams, grade stabilization structures, and animal waste storage facilities.

"The primary operation of the drill rig is still to be determined, but all subsurface investigations performed using the rig will be conducted under the supervision of the State Geologist," said Thompson.

He said the search is on for a permanent indoor storage location for the rig. "We'll get some orientation and training provided by SIMCO later this year once we have an operator and backup operators in place," said Thompson.

Contact Thompson to request use of the drill rig.

*Note: SIMCO Drilling Equipment, Inc. is a company based out of Osceola. The company produces drilling rigs, drilling rig equipment and water well equipment for businesses all around the world.*



SIMCO delivered Iowa NRCS' new drill rig to the Ankeny Field Office on Feb. 28.

# BACK IN THE DAY

1996 - GREENE COUNTY



Current Boone County District Conservationist Kevin Kordick (middle) talks to a Greene County landowner about his family's riparian forest buffer near the Carroll County line in the summer of 1996. Cheri Grauer, a representative from Trees Forever, helps to inspect the buffer trees.

Kordick will be the Resource Team Leader in Webster City with the Iowa NRCS reorganization.

EMPLOYEE  
SPOTLIGHT

**Kelsey  
Blodgett**

**Title:** District Conservationist,  
Fremont County (Sidney)

**College Education:**

Bachelor's Degree:  
Environmental Science with  
emphasis in Biology, 2016,  
Northern Arizona University,  
Flagstaff

**Where did you grow up?**

I grew up in Orange, California,  
about 30 miles south of Los Angeles.

**How did you get started with  
NRCS?**

I started with NRCS as an intern in  
Lyon County in 2014, and returned  
to Iowa as an intern in Fayette  
County in 2015. I was hired as a  
Soil Conservationist in Mills County  
in 2016. In 2019, I became the  
District Conservationist in Fremont  
County.

**How did you become interested  
in conservation?**

Growing up in the city, I was always  
aware of how limited outdoor,  
natural spaces were around me.



*Kelsey Blodgett*

I always desired a career where  
I could be outside, protecting  
or improving the landscape in  
some way. I really got to explore  
conservation in agriculture during  
my summers as an intern. Having  
the opportunity to learn from  
employees and producers all over  
the state those first two summers  
really helped me develop my  
passion for conservation.

**What do you enjoy most about  
working for NRCS?**

I like getting out to the field and  
following up with producers at the  
end of a project. It's always nice to  
see the finished product and hear  
from the producer about what is or  
isn't working well and hear more  
about their future plans. I always  
learn something new during these  
conversations and it makes me  
better at my job.

**What are your career goals?**

As for my future plans, I'm still  
undecided. My goal coming into  
NRCS was to be a DC and so far,  
I'm loving it! That being said, I'm  
always looking for opportunities to  
challenge myself and improve as  
an employee.

**What do you like to do outside  
of work?**

I love kayaking, biking, traveling to  
new places, and I recently started  
getting into hunting.

I've recently started trying to grow  
giant pumpkins since hearing  
about giant pumpkin racing.  
Google it and you won't be  
disappointed!

**Do you have family here in Iowa?**

I have a rescue dog named Brodie  
and a cat named Benson.

# SPOTLIGHT VIDEO

## Conservation At Work Video Series

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service is unveiling a new video series, *Conservation at Work*, which consist of short, 90 second videos that highlight common conservation practices.

The videos shine the spotlight on farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners from across the U.S. who tell us their own conservation stories, and how practices are helping them protect and improve resources and save time and money.

Some of the videos you might find helpful in Iowa involve cover crops, no-till, brush management, water and sediment control basins, grassed waterways, and wetland restoration.



The Conservation at Work video series can be found at [farmers.gov/conserve/conservationatwork](https://farmers.gov/conserve/conservationatwork).

## REORGANIZATION UPDATE: MARCH 16 STARTS NEXT CHAPTER

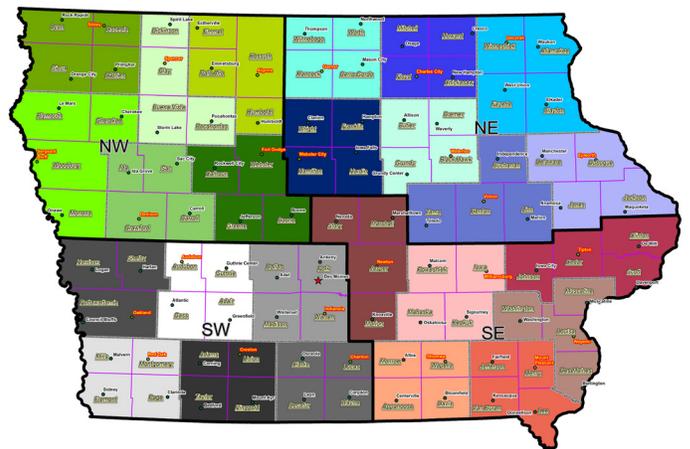
After a couple years of planning, the new Iowa NRCS structure will begin to take shape with the pay period beginning Monday, March 16.

Although many staffers will remain in their current duty stations because of office space limitations, the resource team structure and roles will begin that day.

Another factor that will create a slow transition is filling many vacant positions, including seven resource team lead positions and district conservationist openings.

After March 16, many of those and other vacant positions will be advertised through USDAJobs. In fact, State Conservationist Kurt Simon says he hopes Iowa NRCS has close to 500 employees by the end of the calendar year. Currently, there are about 400 Iowa NRCS employees.

He says many of those positions will be soil conservationists, but there are also many other needs across the state.



"We need to fill out our resource teams with enough technical staff," said Simon. "People in many of those positions are working face-to-face with farmers and we want to be sure we continue to serve our customers well."

If you have questions about the reorganization, contact your immediate supervisor, the assistant state conservationist for field operations (ASTC-FO) at the Area Office, or Jaia Fischer at the State Office (515-284-4525).

## MAKING SOIL:

### HOW SOIL LOSS IS TOLERATED IS BEGINNING TO CHANGE

by Lynn Betts, Retired Iowa NRCS State Public Affairs Specialist (Johnston, Iowa)

Over the years, the conversation among conservationists and conservation-minded farmers in Iowa was about “tolerated soil loss” from erosion. The thinking was you could slow soil loss, but you couldn’t stop it. The NRCS said on average, sloping soils in the state have lost half their topsoil; the question was always when, not if, topsoil would be depleted.

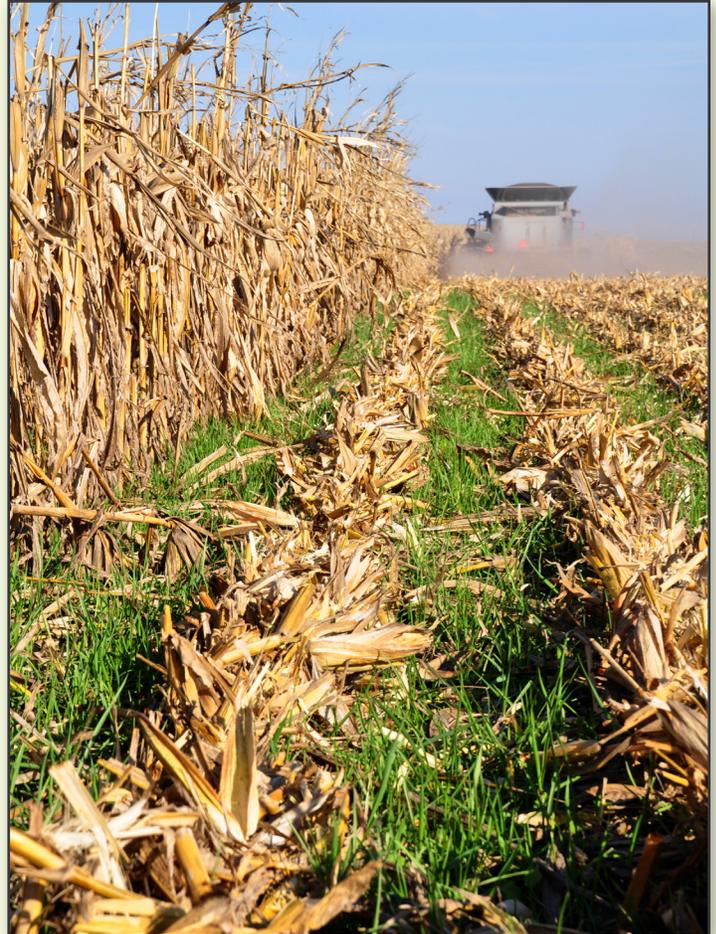
That conversation was much different than the one Iowa NRCS soil scientist and soil health proponent Patrick Chase has today when he talks to groups of conservation-minded farmers about regenerating and building topsoil, rather than losing it.

“Scientists said it would take 300 to 500 years to build an inch of topsoil,” Chase says, “and unfortunately, as sloping soils were cropped, erosion stripped it away faster than that. But in the past 20 years, farmers like Gabe Brown of North Dakota have proven you can not only stop soil erosion, you can actually rebuild an inch of topsoil in three to five years by practicing the five pillars of soil health.”

Chase says these practices mimic natural ecosystems on the prairie that built Iowa’s rich soils in the first place. “Prairies were very diverse, with a variety of growing plants through much of the year to feed microbes in the soil, and they were grazed,” he says. “That’s what we’d like to work toward—soil that’s armored to maximize cover and minimize disturbance, with a diversity of plants growing as much of the year as possible. And, where possible, graze the plants on a rotational basis.”

#### Healthy soils are stable

“Soil that’s tilled falls apart with water,” says Chase. “In a healthy soil, microbes build soil aggregates with pore spaces that retain and exchange air and water. It’s really tough to feed microbes enough to build those aggregates if we have plants growing in the soil only four to five months out of the year with a corn-soybean rotation. I’d love to see a third



Central Iowa farmer Nick Helland aerial seeded an oats cover crop in August to maximize the time their roots would feed the soil microbes last fall. This field was harvested November 6, so it would have been too late to drill the oats.

crop in the rotation, maybe a small grain like hybrid rye that could be harvested early in the year. That would allow a multispecies cover crop to be planted. All those elements, with no-till farming and some grazing of those cover crops, would be a Cadillac system of soil building in my mind.”

Instead, Chase says, a corn-soybean rotation with tillage destroys the microbial life in the soil. “Fungi produce the glue, called glomalin, that holds soil aggregates together,” he explains. “Without that glue, the soil aggregates are not stable—when raindrops hit bare soil at 20 to 30 miles an hour, they displace the soil and it clogs pore spaces. Then we get runoff instead of infiltration. It can take an hour for half an inch of rain to infiltrate into a highly tilled

*Continued on next page...*

## MAKING SOIL CONT...

soil. But in a healthy soil that's been no-tilled with cover crops for a few years, anywhere from six to ten inches can infiltrate in that hour."



State Soil Scientist Patrick Chase

### Short growth better than none

While Chase advocates for the Cadillac system of cover cropping with as much diversity as practical, with winter hardy cover crops that extend growth into the spring, he says growing cover crops for even a few weeks in the fall can make a difference in the soil. Short growth of the cover crop in the fall is better than no growth. That is, it's better than not seeding a cover crop in the fall and not having a cover crop in the field over winter.

"I've seen the difference even a week of fall cover crop growth can make," Chase says. "That's why more and more farmers are planting green—especially planting soybeans into standing, tall cereal rye that they let grow longer into the spring. They want to get the full benefit from that cover crop. But we shouldn't discount what the roots of radishes, rapeseed, kale, or oats can do in the fall. Those plants might winterkill, but their roots can feed microbes longer into the fall compared to nothing growing at all."

### Cereal rye is standard cover

While cover crops aren't being used on a high percentage of cropland, more farmers are trying cover crops and cover crop acreage has steadily

grown across the state. In 2009, Chase notes, a survey by Practical Farmers of Iowa showed an estimated 10,000 acres of cover crops in Iowa. "A 2018 estimate by ISU Extension put the figure at 800,000 acres, so that's a big increase. And a lot of those acres aren't being planted through government programs. About 60% of the people using cover crops now are planting them without any kind of government incentives."

By far, cereal rye is the most used cover crop. "It's easy to work with, and it survives the winter," Chase says. "Which species of cover crop you choose depends on your primary purpose. For instance, a typical nitrogen efficiency without cover crops is 30% to 50%. But that nitrogen efficiency—how much of it is used by the corn plant—can increase to 70% by using a cereal rye cover crop that takes in the nitrogen and then later releases it slowly for use by the corn plant."

"If you're looking to break up compaction, rapeseed has a taproot that can do that," he adds. "The same is true of radishes. Some people are using winter wheat or triticale, and some are using oats. Annual ryegrass is a great plant to aggregate soils and its roots will grow deep into the soil, but you have to watch it because annual ryegrass could be hard to kill if you let it grow too long. You don't have that problem with cereal rye."

### Get started with cover crops

Chase advises trying cover crops or new combinations of cover crops on a small area and using test strips to check on what works and doesn't.

"After six to eight years of no-till and cover crops—maybe not that long if you use cover crop mixtures—you can start taking credit for a healthier soil," he says. "You can be thinking about cutting back on nitrogen fertilizer application, seed treatments and other inputs. You should see an increase in soil organic matter by that time, and notice a much better rate of water infiltration into the soil than you had with tillage and no cover crops. Your soil should be crumbly and look like cottage cheese. This tells you that you've begun to regenerate and build topsoil."

## Changes In IOWA NRCS PERSONNEL

NAME	TITLE	NATURE OF ACTION	EFFECTIVE DATE	LOCATION
Burud, Matthew	Wetland Specialist	Appointment	11/24/19	Atlantic
Gravel, Lee	Natural Resource Spec.	Appointment	11/24/19	Sioux City Area
Howard, Holly	Soil Conservationist	Appointment	11/24/19	Washington
Miller, Kaitlyn	Natural Resource Spec.	Appointment	11/24/19	Sioux City Area
Walden, Suzanne	Program Assistant	Appointment	11/24/19	Creston
Mercial, Wesley	Soil Conservationist	Appointment	11/24/19	Fort Dodge
Shetler, Amanda	District Conservationist	Promotion	11/24/19	Guthrie Center
Huber, Layne	Wetland Specialist	Appointment	12/8/19	Humboldt
Cagle, Michael (Scott)	Asst. State Conservationist for Partnerships	Appointment	12/8/19	Des Moines
Langholdt, Trevor	Soil Conservationist	Appointment	12/8/19	Ida Grove
Henderson, Michael	State Agronomist	Reassignment	12/8/19	Des Moines
Chase, Patrick	State Soil Scientist	Promotion	12/8/19	Des Moines
Kinyon-Anderson, Tara	Administrative Spec.	Promotion	12/8/19	Des Moines
Boone, Candice	Wetland Specialist	Resignation	12/13/19	Williamsburg
Crile, Raeanna	Soil Conservationist	Resignation	12/16/19	Fairfield Area
Debebe, Joseph	Wetland Specialist	Transfer	12/22/19	Fort Dodge
Foxx, Elmer	Secretary	Retirement	12/31/19	Des Moines
Marek, Greg	District Conservationist	Retirement	12/31/19	Orange City
Rogers, Richard	State Archeologist	Retirement	12/31/19	Des Moines
Allen, James	Soil Conservationist	Retirement	1/3/20	Iowa Falls
Nguyen, Han	Management Analyst	Transfer	1/5/20	Des Moines
Sieren, Joshua	District Conservationist	Reassignment	1/5/20	Wapello
Foster, Craig	Soil Conservation Tech	Retirement	1/31/20	Centerville
Willeford, Johnathon	Soil Conservation Tech	Appointment	2/2/20	Spencer
Thompson, Joseph	State Geologist	Promotion	2/16/20	Des Moines

### New Field Office Address:

Allamakee Soil and Water Conservation District  
770 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue SW  
Waukon, IA 52172

## Changes In IDALS-DSCWQ PERSONNEL

NAME	TITLE	NATURE OF ACTION	EFFECTIVE DATE	LOCATION
Bruun, Tracy	Field Representative	Transfer	11/7/19	Northeast to Southwest Field Rep
Hunerdosse, Sandi	Conservation Assistant	Resigned	12/2/19	Warren SWCD
Zelle, Mary Beth	Conservation Assistant	Transfer	12/13/19	Butler SWCD to Bremer SWCD
Sebastian, Angie	SE Field Representative	New Employee	1/10/20	Des Moines
Bentsen, Kenny	State Conservation Tech	New Employee	1/10/20	Sac SWCD
Hanson-Person, Sara	Conservation Assistant	New Employee	1/13/20	Kossuth SWCD
Barnes, Colton	State Conservation Tech	New Employee	1/20/20	Cherokee SWCD
Kuennen, Bobby	NE Field Representative	New Employee	1/24/20	West Union
Kittle, Ashley	Conservation Assistant	New Employee	2/11/20	Butler SWCD
Labertew, Kristine	Conservation Assistant	New Employee	2/26/20	Warren SWCD