CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

FARMERS.GOV #PLANT20 HIGHLIGHTS MULTIPLE IOWANS

MEET 4 NRCS STAFFERS FROM AROUND THE STATE

PAGE 5

PAGE 9-12
Message from State Conservationist Kurt Simon
Technology Keeps NRCS Moving During COVID-19 Pandemic
Iowa Farmers Participate in Farmers.gov #Plant2020
Farmers and Landowners Help Iowa Wetlands Thrive
Farm Bill Provides FA for Easement Maintenance
Back In the Day: Mark Schutt and Dan Paulsen
Employee Spotlight: Jason Hellums
Employee Spotlight: Eric Byrd
Employee Spotlight: Megan Messerole
Employee Spotlight: Nichole Baxter
Video Spotlight: Barry Fisher
Iowa NRCS Reorganization & Staffing Update
Safety Tips for Fleet Vehicle Operators
Iowa NRCS Personnel Changes
IDALS-DSCWQ Personnel Changes
I hope you and your families are doing well, as we live our lives as normally as possible while trying to stay safe and healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

One of the major challenges for all NRCS staff right now is finding a way to communicate with our customers. So many of us – including farmers – prefer face-to-face conversations. And that’s not easy with current social distancing recommendations.

When you do connect with your customers, whether it’s through phone calls, emails, farm visits, or even online video chats, I encourage you to make soil health a part of those discussions. Since I began my tenure as State Conservationist five years ago, promoting soil health has been one of my main priorities.

If you don’t have your Iowa Soil Health Plan handy, please find your copy and review it. We released the plan in Fall 2018. I feel it outlines a successful long-term path for soil health adoption in Iowa. The three major components include: Consistent Messaging, A Trained Workforce, and Empowering Partners.

As our staff reorganization takes shape and we onboard more new employees, delivering on these components will be crucial to keeping the soil health momentum going. Our long-term staffing plan includes positions to support soil health. For example, Hillary Olson recently started her new position as Soil Health Specialist in the State Office. There is also support for soil health at the Area Offices and flexibility on resources teams for members to take the lead on soil health.

I believe we have made gains in soil health education and adoption in Iowa. However, we don’t want the momentum to slow down. In fact, I want it to pick up more steam over the next few years. Take every opportunity possible to learn about the latest soil health information and research and use that information as you work with customers through the conservation planning process.

Enjoy this edition of Current Developments and thanks for all you are doing during this memorable time. Look for more specific guidance soon about USDA’s process for reopening Service Centers.

Sincerely,

Kurt Simon, State Conservationist
In any other era, would NRCS staff have been able to continue delivering the type of customer service to the private landowners of Iowa the way we have during the past few months – while continuing to uphold social distancing recommendations?

This is a question I have wondered several times while teleworking on most days due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Even 10 years ago, NRCS staff were not able to take laptop computers home and use their WiFi to connect to the USDA network. But now, staff have the flexibility to accept, evaluate, and rank program applications right from their homes.

The ability to telework and use new software applications such as Microsoft Teams are allowing NRCS staff across the country to continue to communicate with each other, our partners and farmer customers virtually face to face.

In past eras, staff may have been able to continue to plan conservation, design conservation practices, and conduct other field work like they have this year. But, it’s unlikely that NRCS employees would have been able to respond so swiftly to farmer’s needs, like we are now for hog producers by providing environmentally friendly carcass disposal options through Emergency Animal Mortality Management.

With schools and daycares closed, many staff are trying to work and take care of their kids simultaneously during the day. USDA is thankfully accommodating staff and providing the flexibility to work outside of normal working hours, if necessary, to get our jobs done.

You could make the case that technology has not only kept our workflow moving but has also helped keep us safer. Without the technology we have today, USDA might have been forced to shut down much of its conservation work, furlough staff, or even ask staff to work in unsafe office situations.

I hope everyone has been able to stay safe and healthy throughout this historic, memorable time. I know I never imagined a pandemic like COVID-19 having the impact that it has had. However, it is amazing how well our agency has been able to react, respond and produce the way we have. And a lot of that success is thanks to the technology we already had in place.
Many Iowa farmers and Iowa NRCS Field Offices submitted photos and videos during planting season as part of the Farmers.gov #plant2020 campaign. To view all of the photos and videos, nationally, visit: https://arcg.is/1SmeuK.

Submit planting photos and videos to sharingoursuccesses@usda.gov. To learn more about the campaign, visit farmers.gov/plant2020.

Below are some of Iowa’s submissions:

**Marc Phillips** drills soybeans into corn stubble and a cereal rye cover crop on his brother Mike’s farm west of Barnes City in Poweshiek County.

**Jim Jorgensen** plants no-till corn into corn on his Floyd County farm.

**RW Allen Farms Inc.** plants no-till soybeans into corn stubble east of Grinnell in Poweshiek County.

**Dave Hollingsworth** plants no-till soybeans into a living cereal rye cover crop on his operation near Packwood in Jefferson County.

After a storm destroyed their windbreak last year, the **Karas Family** in Adair County plants a windbreak. The Karas’ adult children and 14 grandchildren all helped with the “next generation” windbreak.
FARMERS AND PRIVATE LANDOWNERS HELP WETLANDS THRIVE

by Sindra Jensen, State Easement Programs Coordinator

Spring is a wonderful time to appreciate the wonders of wetlands. Wetlands protect plants and provide habitat for wildlife, including endangered or threatened species. They also filter water, reduce soil loss, sequester carbon from the atmosphere, reduce flooding and recharge groundwater. And they provide recreational opportunities such as hunting and fishing.

May is American Wetlands Month, a time to celebrate one of nature’s most productive ecosystems and the wonderful ways wetlands enrich the environment and our lives.

Farmers and private landowners in Iowa have worked with NRCS to restore and enhance wetlands for decades. They have incorporated wetlands into their operations for the benefits to the environment and their land. To help realize these benefits they have worked with USDA for assistance through its programs and services.

NRCS offers financial and technical assistance to farmers and private landowners through programs to restore and enhance wetlands. The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)'s Wetland Reserve Easement component offers opportunities to put marginal cropland and other eligible land into permanent and 30-year easements. NRCS accepts ACEP-WRE applications year-round. In Iowa, NRCS currently has 1,658 easements that cover nearly 190,000 acres.

As we celebrate the month, our producers, partners, educators and others deserve thanks for helping to protect wetlands.

Top Photo: A Hancock County wetland easement. Above: A Floyd County wetland easement. (Photos by Jason Johnson)
FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE FOR EASEMENT MAINTENANCE

by John Paulin, Wetland Restoration Specialist

(The following article was used in the latest Iowa Easement Landowners newsletter.)

In the field of neuroscience, the portion of the human brain responsible for what we’ll call “mature decision-making” becomes fully functional between the ages of 25 and 32.

What does this have to do with wetland conservation easements in Iowa, you ask? Back in 1992, Iowa was one of 10 states chosen to pilot the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) making it 28 years old this year.

Historically, the success of WRP (and its successor, ACEP-WRE) was measured by the number of acres enrolled and the dollars spent. But with the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress recognized the “maturity” of the program and took strides to empower NRCS to take a more qualitative approach through the stewardship of all of its wetland conservation easements.

Here in Iowa, there are nearly 1,700 wetland easements totaling about 190,000 acres. Annually, we add 12 to 30 new easements to that total - the vast majority of which are permanent.

The 2018 Farm Bill Committee Report clearly communicated to NRCS that it should prioritize the upkeep of its existing easements, preserving the purposes for which they were taken in the first place - restoration, protection and enhancement of the Nation’s wetlands. This directive creates exciting opportunities for you as an easement owner and the land you manage.

Starting in fiscal year 2020, NRCS will allocate 15% of its annual ACEP funding to the enhancement, maintenance and repair of existing wetland conservation easements enrolled through the WRP, EWRP and ACEP-WRE programs. Eligible practices on your easement could include, but are not limited to:

- Maintenance of existing seedings (prescribed burning, spraying, mowing)
- Repair of existing wetland restoration practices (tile, water control structures, earthworks)
- Wetland/vegetation enhancements (seeding of diverse native seed mixes, shallow water excavation)

Iowa NRCS staff and conservation easement owners have a collaborative opportunity to share in the stewardship of Iowa’s wetlands to yield the best wildlife habitat and water quality.

Easement owners interested in pursuing these funds may be contacting you or the local Area Easement Specialist to discuss stewardship opportunities.
May is Wetlands Month and to help celebrate the occasion, Back In The Day features Tipton Resource Team Lead Mark Schutt standing near a sign at the Hanlontown Slough Project in Worth County in 2000. Mark was the District Conservationist in Worth County at the time. The project consists of eight contiguous wetland easements that total more than 1,000 acres - 350 wetland acres and 650 upland acres.

Another easement project, the Maynard Reese WPA in Kossuth County, was dedicated on May 20, 1998. At left, Dan Paulsen (current Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations in Sioux City) stands in the easement in 2000 while he was the District Conservationist in Kossuth County. Reese was an internationally known wildlife artist and the only 5-time winner of the Federal Duck Stamp Contest.
**Title:** Business Tools Specialist, Northwest Area Office (Sioux City)

**College Education:**
Graduated from Park University (Parkville, MO) with a degree in Geography 2018; Graduate Certificate from University of Denver in GIS (2019)

**Where did you grow up?**
Grew up in Kentucky worked summers on a local farm bailing hay.

**What did you do prior to joining NRCS this year?**
I served 20 years in the US Army, 1998 - 2019. Then, 1 year contracting for the Dept. of Defense (DOD) in Fort Benning, GA.

**How did you become interested in working for NRCS?**
I wanted to work for an agency that placed a high value on conservation and the environment.

**Why did you choose this career path?**
I chose geospatial by accident, when getting ready to start doing college in the army again at a later age. The counselor that I worked with would not let me take the easy way out and pick the fastest degree plan. She forced me to pick a subject I thought would be interesting before she would process my application. I chose geography and one of my first classes was Introduction to GIS and I was hooked.

**What are your career goals?**
To eventually end up with the experience to help in conservation and environmental stewardship that I can look back on.

**What do you like to do outside of work?**
To learn new things, usually to help with work.

**Do you have family here in Iowa?**
Married to my wonderful wife Tabitha. We have no children, but an aging Alaskan Husky Mix named Mukluk.
Title: Business Tools Specialist, Southwest Area Office (Atlantic)

College Education:
Bachelor of Science Degree: Excelsior College (Albany, NY), 1991

What has been your career path, leading you to NRCS?
I’ve had 25 rewarding years working in the Ag industry. Companies I’ve worked for have included Dekalb Genetics (acquired by Monsanto); Case (acquired by Fiat); CNH; & John Deere. My expertise has been aligned with support of advanced farming technologies. The geographies have largely focused in the tall grass prairie region; however, I did get some broader land use exposure managing the technical side of the JD Remote Sensing team.

I elevated to the Program Management Office while on assignment with JD Financial. In the PM capacity, my last assignment involved architecting a framework to roll out Tracking Technologies globally and working with a diverse, distributed team. It was a great opportunity to work with folks from all over the world. It brought to the forefront the importance of diversity and inclusion.

How did you get started with NRCS?
I can quite honestly say I would never trade-in the career path I followed; but, had the opportunity present itself to align with the NRCS much earlier in my career, I’m confident in saying it could have easily evolved into a life-long career.

I was taking an enrichment class at DMACC, in environmental science, and had an assignment to write a paper on either a local, state, or federal agency. Since recently hearing some chatter about Cedar Lake being involved in some sort of watershed program, I figured I would target that as the subject of the paper. In addition to the typical online research, I wanted to add an interview to the paper, so I called the Madison County NRCS office and landed at the desk of Matt Allen, DC for Madison County. After explaining my assignment, Matt didn’t hesitate to meet with me to discuss the program, as well as the range of programs offered by NRCS. I’ve been in the Ag industry a few years and I certainly knew high level about the NRCS, but Matt’s energy and commitment made me take a deeper look into the organization. So, kudos to Matt…but, a year and a half later, and now having the opportunity to be a member of the team, I’m seeing Matt’s energy/commitment applied throughout the organization, from SO to the FO level, and vice versa. Is it perfect, no. But let me assure you, having experienced several organizations throughout my career, and speaking strictly from what I’ve experienced, this organization ranks among the top!

What are your career goals?
I’ve been married 25 years with two children. The wife manages her own business and is quite successful in designing and marketing jewelry via the online marketplace. My son is out of the nest and is exploring his career opportunities. He’s completed his Associates and will pursue his B.S/B.A. after identifying his career interest. My daughter, who has Down Syndrome, currently resides with Mom and Dad. Until she decides to spread her wings, we’ll keep her well cared for and involved in the community. Hats off to the Winterset community for the level of inclusion and acceptance with our special need’s children/adults.

What do you enjoy most about working for NRCS?
Like many of my fellow NRCS colleagues, everything and anything linked to the outdoors. In my younger years, sailing was it. Having grown up on the East Coast and a father that lived and breathed sailing, allowed me the opportunity to spend summers sailing up and down the East Coast.

My most recent fixation has been birding. It’s opened a whole new window to measure the health of the environment. It’s fun and rewarding to actively participate in Citizen Science projects by contributing observations that can help drive decisions in wildlife management.
Title: State Archaeologist, State Office (Des Moines)

College Education:
- University of Minnesota-Duluth, Bachelor of Art in English and Anthropology, graduated in 2012
- St. Cloud State University, Master of Science in Cultural Resource Management, graduated 2014

During my graduate schooling, I did my Master’s thesis on a 4,000 year old copper working site on Isle Royale National Park. I also interned out there for a season, which was an amazing experience with lots of moose-sightings and big-fish-catching!

Where did you work prior to NRCS?
My first job was right out of grad school as the archaeologist for the Sanford Museum and Planetarium in Cherokee, Iowa in 2014. While at the Sanford Museum, I conducted contract work, taught educational programs, designed exhibits, and much more! I was there for six years before getting offered the position of archaeologist for the NRCS State Office in 2020.

How did you become interested in working for NRCS?
I first became interested in the NRCS when Richard Rogers, the previous archaeologist, would host cultural resource training courses at the Sanford Museum. From the first meeting, I was excited about the priority for avoidance and the idea of traveling around the state of Iowa and seeing all of the cool archaeological sites around the state.

Why are you interested in this particular job?
I love to be outside exploring new places and making discoveries!

What are your goals for your new position?
I hope to visit an important archaeological site in each county of Iowa. I am excited for the educational aspects of the job and look forward to learning all I can about the natural resource side of things, too!

What do you like to do outside of work?
When I’m not at work, I enjoy hiking and camping. I also dabble in fiction writing and baking pies.

Tell us about your family.
My husband Jordan is a singer/songwriter that travels around the Midwest for gigs. I like to go along and explore the region with him! While we lived in Cherokee, he also worked for RJ Thomas Manufacturing as their purchasing director. Once we get moved to Des Moines he will be looking for a new job in the area.

Where did you grow up?
I grew up in a small town of 300, called Underwood, in central Minnesota.
**EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT**

**Nichole Baxter**

**Title:** District Conservationist, Jasper County (Newton)

**College Education:**
Bachelor of Science Degree: Animal Ecology, 2007, Iowa State University

**Where has your career taken you since you graduated from ISU?**
- 2012-2019: NRCS Soil Conservationist in Oskaloosa
- 2010-2012: NRCS Soil Conservationist in Greenfield
- 2007-2010: AmeriCorps/Iowa DNR Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas Statewide Volunteer and Outreach Coordinator in Boone
- 2007: Iowa DNR Multiple Species Inventory & Monitoring in Boone

**Where did you grow up?**
I grew up in rural Carroll County in west-central Iowa. Weekends were always spent at my grandparents’ farm exploring and playing with cousins. I also spent a lot of time riding bikes, taming wild farm cats, and helping my parents with yard work and gardening.

**How did you get started with NRCS?**
I had heard of NRCS in college through my watershed management class and other courses, but my emphasis was primarily ecology and wildlife management. After working a few years of contract and temporary appointments with the Iowa DNR, I had applied for a private lands biologist position, but did not get it.

The District Conservationist in Adair County at the time followed up with me afterwards and talked to me about a Soil Conservationist career intern position. Since Iowa is mostly privately owned, I saw it as an opportunity to work with a wide array of people and try to make a difference by preserving, protecting and improving Iowa’s natural resources across most of Iowa.

**What are your career goals?**
One of my goals is to spend more time on education and outreach. Previously being part of the local team of Mahaska & Marion Women, Land & Legacy was one of the most rewarding experiences of my career thus far, and it is something I hope to develop in Jasper County. I have enjoyed connecting women to discuss challenges and share knowledge about agriculture and conservation. Beyond that, I want to continue providing opportunities for Jasper County landowners and producers to meet their conservation goals and help them develop a sustainable plan for their land that they can pass on to future generations.

**What are your hobbies?**
I love to read, draw, paint, sing, bird watch and exploring wild places with my family. It’s hard to find time to do many of these at the moment, but I feel most at peace when I can lose myself in a good book, observe nature or do something creative!

**Can you tell us about your family?**
I’ve been married to my husband, Ross, for almost 10 years. We have 3 awesome, loud, rambunctious and very active little boys – Marshall (8), Cooper (5) and Owen (2). They are always keeping us on our toes, love the outdoors as much as we do and enjoy picking on each other. We also have a black lab, Marli. She’s great at retrieving pheasants, loves taking long walks and laying on our bed when nobody’s watching.
The NRCS Central Region Soil Health Division Team Leader, Barry Fisher, spoke with a group of Northeast Area NRCS staff, conservation partners, and farmers in late February.

Northeast Area staff videotaped Fisher’s presentation on Building Soil Function. Fisher’s presentation serves as an excellent training tool for new employees or a refresher for veteran employees. Catch the video on YouTube: https://youtu.be/ckmTU35AabQ.

REORGANIZATION AND STAFFING UPDATE

Two months into the Iowa NRCS reorganization and the maps are filling in with faces and the resource teams are slowly beginning to take shape.

Currently, 79 out of 100 District Conservationist positions are filled, but only 15 of the 25 Resource Team Lead positions are filled. Approximately 100 new positions (mostly due to the reorganization) are ready to be posted to USAJobs.gov.

As most of you know – outside of the reorganization – Iowa NRCS is hiring 100 Soil Conservationists (1 per Field Office). Those positions were advertised earlier this year. As of May 15:

» 18 have already started
» 56 have start dates ranging from May 24 to July 19
» 18 selections were made recently
» 7 have tentative offer letters, but no official offer letter
» 1 with no selection, due to a declination

If you have questions about the reorganization or other staffing, 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).
SAFETY TIP REMINDERS FOR OPERATORS OF FLEET VEHICLES

The following safety tips (via FPAC-VEHICLE-01-MJ March 10, 2020) are designed to provide operators of NRCS fleet vehicles with a reminder of the causative factors that contribute to departmental accidents involving fleet vehicles.

These tips are derived from lessons learned/best practices from an accident review board process with the goal of reducing departmental accidents. All accidents are labeled as preventable or non-preventable from a risk-management perspective.

Safety Tip # 1 – The majority (80%) of backing accidents result from several causative factors:

1. Collisions with fixed objects resulting from a failure to conduct a “walk-around” to identify objects in close proximity to the vehicle.
2. Failure to employ a spotter at the rear of a vehicle that presents visual obstruction to the operator when maneuvering in tight spaces.
3. Failure to properly use a backup camera on a vehicle resulting in misjudging backing distances.

Determination: Preventable

Safety Tip # 2 – Misjudging the distancing of extension mirrors on the driver’s and passenger’s side of the vehicle, resulting in “mirror slapping” against other vehicles parked or in motion while maneuvering through traffic.

1. Measure your mirrors to determine the distance they protrude from the vehicle you are operating. Not all mirrors are equal in distance and radius
2. Be cognizant of the distances when maneuvering in tight turns and heavy traffic conditions where lane changes often take place. Large F-250, 350, and 450 vehicle types are prone to mirror slapping accidents.
3. Adjust your mirrors to afford optimal vision to the rear of your vehicle. Each mirror should align to visualize the lane to your right and left to reducing the possibility of lane encroachment accidents.

Determination: Preventable

Safety Tip # 3 – Speed greater than reasonable and prudent for existing conditions. These conditions include but are not strictly limited to the following:

1. Wet, icing, and snowy road surface conditions resulting in hydroplaning and skidding.
2. Uneven road surfaces during road resurfacing operations, road construction, and loss of traction environments.
3. Heavy volume traffic areas requiring reduced speed to avoid rear-end collisions.

Determination: Preventable
## Changes In Iowa NRCS Personnel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>TITLE</th>
<th>NATURE OF ACTION</th>
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<td>5/10/20</td>
<td>Webster City</td>
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<td>Tschirgi, Lissa</td>
<td>Soil Conservationist</td>
<td>Reassignment</td>
<td>5/10/20</td>
<td>West Union</td>
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<td>Messerole, Megan</td>
<td>Archaeologist</td>
<td>Career Cond Appt</td>
<td>5/10/20</td>
<td>Des Moines</td>
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<td>Clark, Adam</td>
<td>Cartographer (GIS Spec.)</td>
<td>Career Cond Appt</td>
<td>5/10/20</td>
<td>Des Moines</td>
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*Career Cond Appt = New Hire*

Changes In IDALS-DSCWQ PERSONNEL

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<th>NAME</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>NATURE OF ACTION</th>
<th>EFFECTIVE DATE</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
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<tr>
<td>Merkouris, Janelle</td>
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<td>New Employee</td>
<td>3/12/20</td>
<td>Worth SWCD</td>
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<td>Johnson, Carrie</td>
<td>Conservation Assistant</td>
<td>Resigned</td>
<td>5/8/20</td>
<td>Lyon SWCD</td>
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<td>Brooks, Joy</td>
<td>Conservation Assistants</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>5/15/20</td>
<td>Delaware SWCD</td>
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