

Des Moines County Conservation

FY25-26 Annual Report



Chris Lee, Executive Director
Des Moines County Conservation
11627 Starr's Cave Rd.
Burlington, IA 52601
(319) 753-8260
www.dmcconservation.com
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Des Moines County Conservation is dedicated to the sustainability of natural resources through land stewardship, conservation education, and by providing quality outdoor recreation opportunities.

FY25/26 Highlights

Annual Report Highlights

Year in Review

Much of the year's work centered on making parks more accessible, more resilient, and better prepared for the future. Some improvements were highly visible, including new docks, beach handrails, and upcoming campsite paving. Other work happened behind the scenes through grant writing, strategic planning, land management, volunteer coordination, and partnership development.

Together, these efforts reflect the department's continued commitment to caring for public lands, improving outdoor recreation opportunities, and using partnerships to stretch local dollars for the benefit of Des Moines County residents and visitors.

Key Department Highlights

- Completed a new Department Strategic Plan to guide priorities over the next several years, including land stewardship, outdoor recreation, facility needs, partnerships, and financial sustainability.
- Installed new docks at Sullivan Slough and completely rebuilt the docks at Casey Barrow, Hawkeye Dolbee and Tama Beach boat ramps, improving river access.
- Continued ADA accessibility improvements at Big Hollow Recreation Area, including beach handrails and the planned paving of additional campsites.
- Secured funding for major forestry and habitat work across multiple county parks.
- Continued work on the Alliant conservation easement and related mitigation efforts. Once complete, this will add over 200 acres of public land along the Mississippi River adjacent to the state's Blackhawk Bottoms Wildlife Management Area, creating a 850+ acre complex.
- Approved the DOT Mitigation Area Management Plan and 28E agreement which will add over 20 acres of critical habitat along Flint Creek and a new Flint River Trail trailhead west of Hwy 61 in 2027.
- Continued discussions and planning around the Flint River Trail connection between Starr's Cave and the city of Burlington's trail terminus at Mill Dam Road.
- Continued the transition of the Ranger House at Big Hollow as a public rental, including shoulder-season promotion and listing on Airbnb.



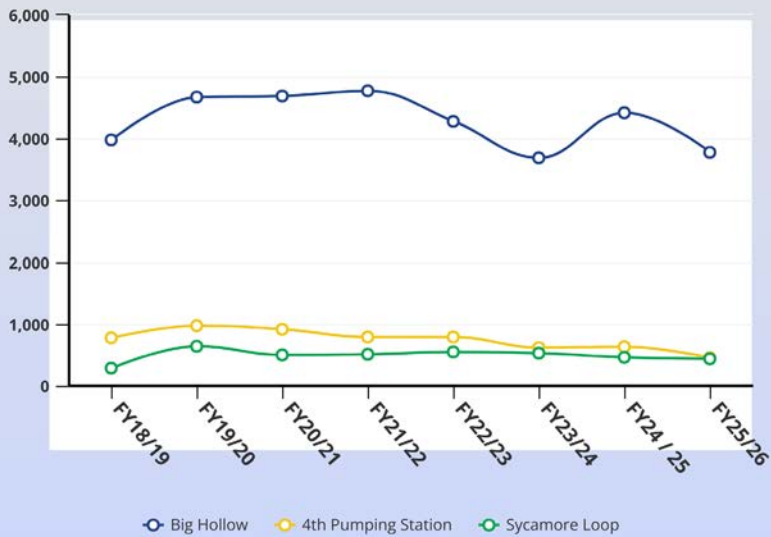
Major Grants and Outside Funding

- \$228,000 secured to pave additional campsites at Big Hollow Recreation Area as part of the department's ongoing effort to improve ADA accessibility.
 - * \$114,000 Land and Water Conservation Fund Grant matched with REAP funds and funds held by the Partners for Conservation Foundation that were donated specifically for Big Hollow
 - * \$17,486 awarded for new boat docks at Sullivan Slough to improve Mississippi River access and help reduce issues caused by fluctuating river levels.
 - * \$13,100 Water Recreation Access Cost-Share Grant matched with FEMA funds carried over from prior flood-related work
- \$111,370 secured for contracted forestry work to improve woodland health and implement existing forest management plans across multiple county parks
 - * \$89,096 from Forest Resiliency Partnership Program
 - * \$16,705 in Wildlife Habitat Stamp funding
 - * \$5,569 from the Partners for Conservation Foundation
- \$11,787.93 awarded from the Partners for Conservation Foundation from the I Heart County Parks Banquet

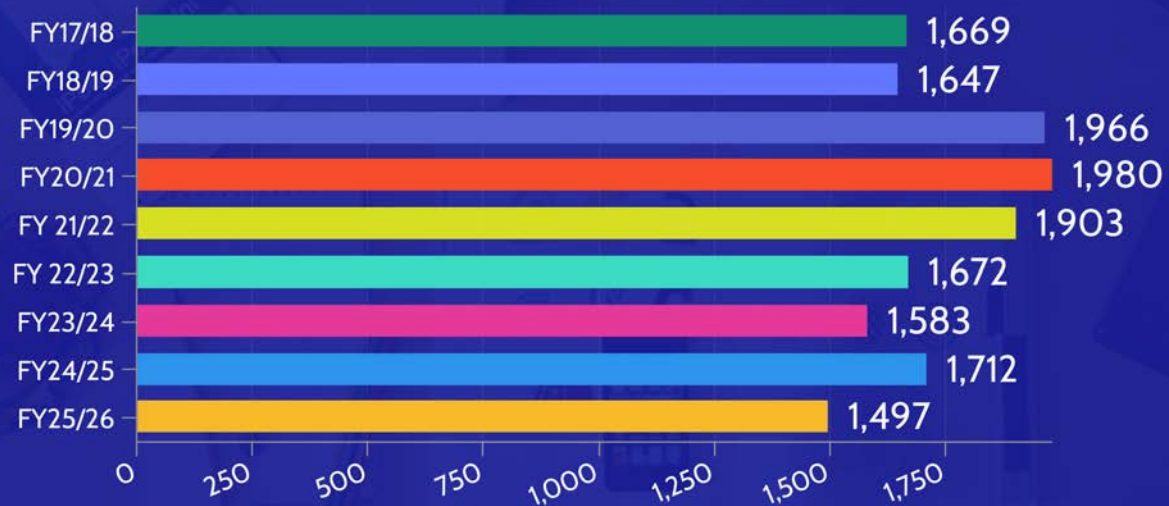
Memorial Gifts and Local Support

- We worked closely with the Partners for Conservation Foundation throughout the year:
 - * Recognized Genila Wolgemuth for more than 16 years of service as the Foundation Administrator.
 - * Approved an administrative service agreement with the Foundation to provide admin support and bookkeeping for a service fee of \$1,000 per quarter.
 - * The Foundation hosted the second annual Burlington River Days event attracting over 11,000 people to the riverfront and generating over \$36,000 in net proceeds
 - * The Foundation continues the effort to resurrect the Big Muddy's building on Burlington's riverfront, receiving a \$50,000 donation from Marcia and Dan Wiedemeier and making progress on securing a tentative donation agreement for the building
- Friends of Des Moines County Parks, a subsidiary of the Partners for Conservation Foundation, formed and completed park improvement projects at the Welter Recreation Area campground and Big Hollow Playground, among other activities.
- Ron Wooldridge Memorial funded construction of a new fishing dock on "Pat's Pond" at Big Hollow Recreation Area.
- Jim Garnjobst Memorial funded a new flagpole and landscaping improvements at Starr's Cave Nature Center.
- Kevin Russell Memorial funded a pollinator garden at Starr's Cave Nature Center, including a community pollinator plug planting.
- Afinitas and Mediapolis High School Welding Program fabricated and installed new handrails along the sidewalks at the Big Hollow beach.

Total Number of People Camping by Area



TOTAL NUMBER OF CAMPING REGISTRATIONS IN DES MOINES COUNTY



INCLUDES ALL CAMPGROUNDS PLUS THE CABINS

Outdoor Recreation

Annual Report July 2025 to June 2026
John H. Witte, Jr. Observatory Complex

- 635 public visitors,
745 hours of Volunteer time.

Donations by the Following:

SG Constrction - removing dome motor, transporting to Industrial Motors for cleaning, installing motor and installing parts from Ash Dome.... scaffold, lift.

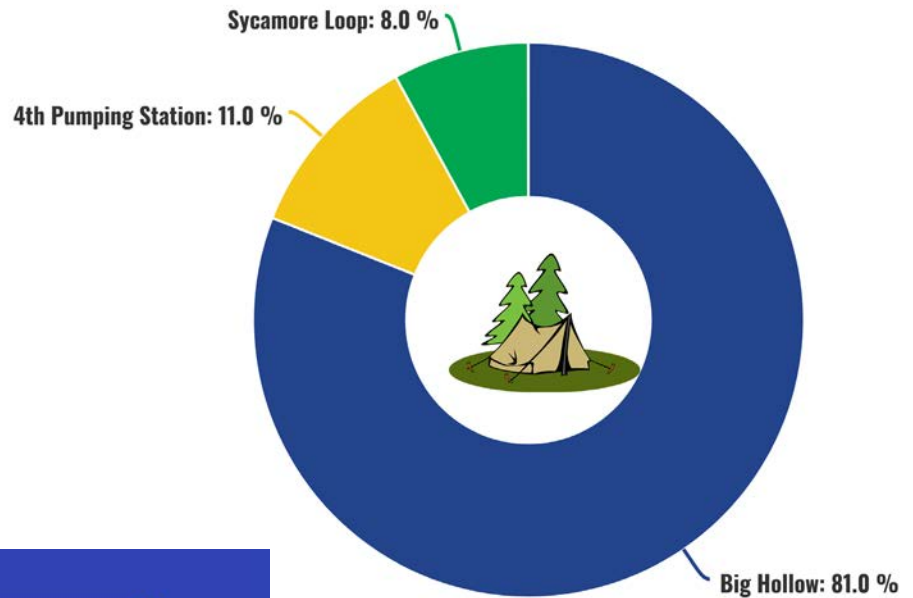
Industrial Motors - cleaning the dome motor, ordering/paying for dome parts from Ash Dome.

Jason McClure, McClure Masonry - Tuckpointing the John H. Witte Sign built by Claus Benninghoven in 1986.



Where Are People Camping?

Based on total nights, FY25/26



Shooting Range Membership

*Based on paid renewals



Trails

Park / Area	Miles of off-road Trails
Big Hollow	10.3
Flint River Trail	8.2
Hunt Woods	2.3
Luckenbill Woods	2.2
North Gorge Trail	1.5
Sarr's Cave	3.7
Total: 28.2 miles	

Big Hollow Recreation Area

18853 152nd Ave, Sperry
798 acres



Leopold Recreation Area

11816 Mill Dam Rd, Burlington
235 Acres



Starr's Cave

Nature Center & Preserve

11627 Starr's Cave Rd, Burlington
184 acres



Hickory Bend Conservation Area

16256 155th Ave, Sperry
269 acres



Welter Recreation Area

16839 Skunk River Rd, Burlington
79 acres



Luckenbill Woods

8795 Hawkeye Rd, Mediapolis
76 acres



Hunt Woods

12412 65th St, Burlington
58 acres



Kevin J Gahn Memorial Recreation Area

13724 Washington Rd, Burlington
56 acres, Public access is limited



FEMA Buyout Properties

57 Parcels, No public Access
102 acres

Sullivan Slough River Access

3175 Sullivan Slough Rd, Burlington
22 acres



4th Pumping Plant Recreation Area

2073 Pumping Station Rd, Oakville
17 acres



Chautauqua Roadside Park

10530 Mediapolis Rd, Mediapolis
10 acres

Hawkeye Dolbee River Access

4629 Lake Rd, Oakville
10 acres



Tama Beach River Access

13518 Tama Rd, Burlington
3 acres



Casey Barrow River Access

1867 180th St, Burlington
2 acres



Edgewater Beach River Access

13290 Tama Rd, Burlington
1 acre



Zion School

16495 155th Ave, Sperry
1 acre



North Gorge Trail

9668 Golf Course Rd, Burlington
36 acres



Harold and Mildred Linder Conservation Area

3807 170th St, Sperry
105 acres



Legend

- Camping
- Hunting
- Mississippi River Access
- Swimming
- Boat Access
- Picnic Area
- Shelter Houses
- Dump Station
- Restrooms
- Fishing
- Hiking
- Bike Trails
- Electrical Hook-Ups
- Water

Land Stewardship

LAND STEWARDSHIP

Our focus this year was on maintenance. We worked hard at staying on top of invasive species, doing the maintenance mowing on areas that we had cleared last year, and applying fire when and where we can. Our fall burn season was short, resulting in fewer timber burns than we had hoped for. We also added some new food plots this year.

Public Land

- 10.75 acres of food plots planted
- 46.59 acres of prairie burned
- 15.1 acres of timber burned



ENVIRONMENTAL/CONSERVATION EDUCATION PROGRAM

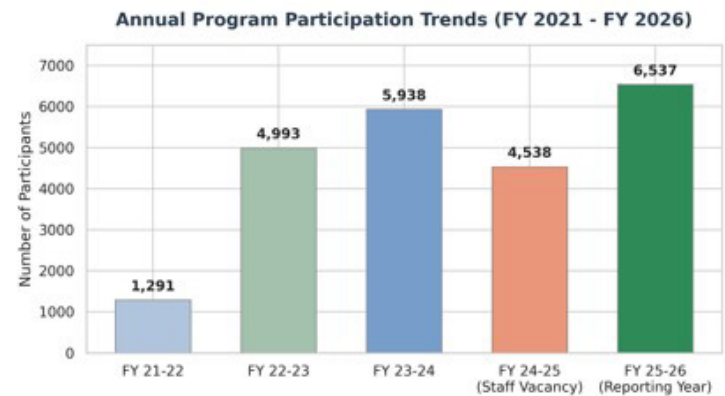
Activities of the EE Program Staff

JULY 2025 – JUNE 2026

Staffing Recovery and Resilience

This past fiscal year marked a powerful period of structural recovery, strategic adaptation, and deep community connection for the environmental education programming at Des Moines County Conservation. After navigating a challenging transition in Fiscal Year 2024-2025—during which a multi-month vacancy in our Naturalist position temporarily restricted operational capacity and artificially suppressed historical data trends—FY 25-26 represents a triumphant return to full operational strength.

With a stable team in place, deliberate program modifications, and key workforce development partnerships, we successfully expanded our regional footprint and established a new high-water mark for public engagement. The narrative of this year proves that the appetite for outdoor education within the county remains robust; returning to full staffing levels simply provided the framework required to meet it.



Accountability & Impact: Where the Data Tells the Story

A rigorous review of the data compiled this year reveals that our education team successfully delivered 334 distinct programs, engaging a total of 6,542 participants. When compared to previous years, this represents a 44% increase in program participation over the previous vacancy-affected year and beats our previous five-year fully staffed record significantly.

Our team conducted 220 formal academic programs, serving 3,164 students across preschool through 12th grade. We maintained a heavy, foundational focus on early childhood and elementary education, which accounted for 2,892 of those student interactions. Furthermore, our specialized seasonal tracks provided intensive multi-day outdoor experiences for youth groups, blending active outdoor recreation with environmental systems learning.

Community engagement remained a cornerstone of our mission, with 39 public programs welcoming 1,045 residents to our parks and nature center. This included highly successful regional volunteer planting sessions, habitat restoration instruction, and guided walks that drew multi-generational crowds.

True to our commitment to safe outdoor recreation, specialized sessions and community-driven field workshops saw high engagement, particularly in building confidence and field-readiness among young and first-time sportsmen in the region.



Conservation Education

Strategic Shifts & Innovative Partnerships

To fortify our staffing recovery, we utilized an innovative partnership with Iowa Works to bring a dedicated intern onto our team starting in October. This position added immediate operational leverage, directly facilitating or assisting with 30 distinct programs and interacting with 1,267 participants over the remainder of the fiscal year.

Deliberate Pivot in After-School Program Participation: In a conscious move to protect staff workflows and elevate engagement quality, we intentionally reduced our recurring presence within site-based weekly after-school setups. This deliberate change allowed our educators to step away from high-frequency routine visits and instead reallocate those exact resources toward high-impact, exclusive outdoor recreation field trips where students came directly onto our landscape for archery, fishing clinics, and place-based programming.



Interactive training and technical field workshops supported by expanded staff and intern workflows.

"This pivot allowed us to focus heavily on immersive field experiences where participants actively engage with our wild spaces."

Digital Outreach & Media Engagement

To complement our expanding physical footprint, Des Moines County Conservation significantly advanced its public outreach through strategic digital engagement over the past fiscal year.

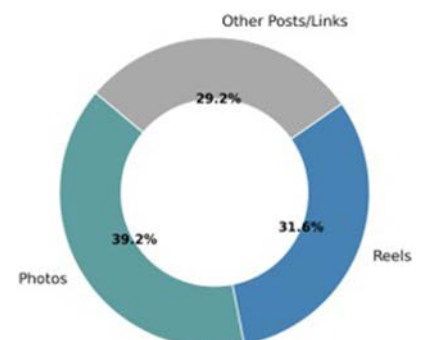
By using modern content strategies on our Facebook platform to enhance regional environmental literacy, our digital analytics recorded explosive growth from July 2025 through June 2026:

- **Broad Public Reach:** Department content generated 614,076 total views, successfully positioning our educational materials and conservation updates within the daily feeds of the regional public.
- **Community Investment:** The collective time invested by the community watching our content totaled 20 days and 20 hours of watch time, representing a 949% escalation over previous baselines.
- **New Audience:** Our outreach successfully broke past historical boundaries, with 55.1% of our digital traffic driven by non-followers, opening a major new pipeline for community awareness and park recruitment.

High-quality photos (39.2%) and fast-paced, dynamic Reels (31.6%) proved to be our most effective tools for capturing community attention and communicating regional conservation priorities.

Public commitment to deeper educational storytelling increased dramatically. Short-form 3-second views rose to 79,664 (a 640% increase), while long-form 1-minute video views surged to 5,298 (a 1,643% increase).

Content Performance Hierarchy
(Distribution of Visual Engagement Share)



Conservation Education

Regional Recognition & Community Impact

Our commitment to leveraging conservation spaces for broader community advocacy was distinctly recognized this fiscal year. Des Moines County Conservation was honored to receive the 2026 Donate Life Month Impact Award from the Iowa Donor Network, highlighting our department as an outstanding community partner. This recognition underscores the deep cross-sector value of our public events—such as our community runs and awareness initiatives hosted at Starr’s Cave—that successfully blend wellness, appreciation of natural resources, and vital civic advocacy.

Looking Ahead

When you look back at where we started, navigating a tough stretch of understaffing just a year ago, the turnaround this fiscal year is something we are incredibly proud of. We aren’t just getting back on our feet; we are moving forward with a much clearer sense of direction, better local partnerships, and a stronger connection to our community than ever before.

Having a stable, full-time team again—combined with the fantastic boost from our Iowa Works intern and a massive, unexpected surge in our social media reach—has allowed us to connect with people we simply couldn’t reach in the past. This year proved that our community’s appetite for outdoor learning, clean parks, and hands-on recreation is as strong as it has ever been. By taking control of our schedule, focus, and digital storytelling, we’ve laid a rock-solid foundation. We are excited to keep this momentum going and build an even bigger impact in the years ahead.



Presentation of the 2026 Donate Life Month Impact Award to Des Moines County Conservation by the Iowa Donor Network.

25-26 Program and Participant Analysis

Group	Programs		Participants	
	# of Programs	+/- change from previous FY	# of Participants	+/- change from previous FY
Preschool – K	54	48	729	607
1st – 2nd	60	-39	907	470
3rd – 5th	72	55	1,256	906
6th – 8th	17	13	146	106
9th – 12th	17	12	126	56
Homeschools	11	5	260	136
Care Centers	3	1	54	-10
Youth Groups / After School	12	-26	300	-457
Civic Groups	4	2	85	28
Public	39	-10	1,045	-1,333
Professional	6	4	1492	1471
Hunter/Range Safety	1	-1	26	-18
Camps	38	-9	116	-47
Totals	334	55	6,542	1,915

Financial Statement

REAP Fund - Revenue	
Account	Revenues
0023-2-22-6110-846067 REAP GRANTS-CONTR-EQUAL SHARE	9,265.00
0023-2-22-6110-846068 REAP GRANTS-PER CAPITA	7,585.00
0023-4-22-6110-600000 INTEREST ON INVESTMENTS	2,029.95
Total - REAP Revenues	18,879.95
Conservation Reserve Fund - Revenue	
Account	Revenues
0027-0-22-0300-900000 TRANSFER FROM GENERAL BASIC FUND	463,551.00
0027-1-22-6110-412000 BOAT TITLES	1,315.00
0027-1-22-6110-441021 SHOOTING RANGE CERT-NEW	7,320.00
0027-1-22-6110-441022 SHOOTING RANGE CERT-RENEWALS	13,575.00
0027-1-22-6110-520000 CABIN RENTALS	14,051.82
0027-1-22-6110-520031 CAMP FEES-SYCAMORE LOOP	7,499.00
0027-1-22-6110-520038 CAMP FEES-BIG HOLLOW CREEK	86,489.00
0027-1-22-6110-520039 CAMP FEES-4TH PUMPING STATION	12,273.00
0027-1-22-6110-520041 CAMP FEES-MISC RELATED TO CAMP	11,300.00
0027-1-22-6110-523044 REC FACILITY RENT SHOOTING RANGE	275.00
0027-1-22-6110-523047 REC FACILITY RENT-SHELTERS	145.00
0027-1-22-6110-847000 MISC REIMB	6,002.29
0027-1-22-6110-847064 MISC REIMB-PLANTING SERVICES	20,326.94
0027-1-22-6120-529000 PROGRAM FEES	9,496.35
0027-1-22-6120-810000 DONATION	23,589.08
0027-3-22-6110-242200 FEMA	5,929.64
0027-3-22-6110-265300 MARINE FUEL TAX GRANT	13,100.00
Total - Conservation Reserve Fund Revenues	696,283.12

General Supplemental - Expense				
Account	Adjusted Appropriation	Expenditures	% Rem.	\$ Balance
0002-22-6100-000-11000 FICA	10,161.00	9,969.28	1.89	191.72
0002-22-6100-000-11100 IPERS	12,539.00	12,483.43	0.44	55.57
0002-22-6100-000-11300 GROUP INSURANCE	30,226.00	28,765.34	4.83	1,460.66
0002-22-6110-000-11000 FICA	19,259.00	19,385.25	-0.52	-99.25
0002-22-6110-000-11100 IPERS	21,997.00	22,733.07	-3.35	-736.07
0002-22-6110-000-11300 GROUP INSURANCE	47,574.00	60,745.11	-27.69	-13,171.11
0002-22-6120-000-11000 FICA	11,448.00	8,637.67	24.55	2810.33
0002-22-6120-000-11100 IPERS	13,341.00	10,004.67	25.01	3,336.33
0002-22-6120-000-11300 GROUP INSURANCE	43,104.00	30,199.40	29.94	12,904.60
Total - General Supplemental	209,649.00	202,896.22	3.22	6,752.78

Conservation Reserve Fund - Expense

Account	Adjusted Appropriation	Expenditures	% Rem.	\$ Balance
0027-22-0220-000-24220 FEMA	27,398.00	27,397.50	0.00	.50
0027-22-0220-000-62010 PARKS/PERM. IMPROVEMENTS	25,000.00	23,569.18	6.00	1,430.82
0027-22-6100-000-10010 ADMINISTRATORS/EXEC DIRECTOR	74,058.00	73,803.38	0.00	254.62
0027-22-6100-000-10050 CORR OFF/P RNGR/OFC MGR/CIV ATTY	54,890.00	54,616.03	0.00	273.97
0027-22-6100-000-10200 LONGEVITY	3,880.00	3,880.00	0.00	0.00
0027-22-6100-000-26000 OFFICE SUPPLIES	1,000.00	659.59	44.00	340.41
0027-22-6100-000-26200 DATA PROCESSING SUPPLIES	1,500.00	1,936.08	-29.00	-436.08
0027-22-6100-000-29400 WEARING APPAREL & UNIFORMS	2,000.00	1,998.86	0.00	1.14
0027-22-6100-000-40000 OFC PUBLICATIONS & LEGAL NOTICES	300.00	215.22	28.00	84.78
0027-22-6100-000-41400 TELECOMMUNICATIONS SRVS	8,000.00	9,160.81	-15.00	-1,160.81
0027-22-6100-000-42210 SCHOOL OF INSTRUCTION	6,000.00	6,608.23	-10.00	-608.23
0027-22-6100-000-44400 OFC & DATA P EQUIP REPR/MAINT	500.00	0.00	100.00	500.00
0027-22-6100-000-48000 DUES & MEMBERSHIPS	3,000.00	4,975.74	-66.00	-1,975.74
0027-22-6110-000-10020 DEPUTIES/ASSTS/INVESTI/FOREMAN	58,321.00	56,071.32	4.00	2,249.68
0027-22-6110-000-10030 CLERKS	51,196.00	50,954.24	0.00	241.75
0027-22-6110-000-10070 PARK TECHNICIANS	93,155.00	94,593.44	-2.00	-1,438.44
0027-22-6110-000-10100 TEMPORARY & PART TIME	44,915.00	48,268.33	-7.00	-3,353.33
0027-22-6110-000-10200 LONGEVITY	4,160.00	3,670.00	12.00	490.00
0027-22-6110-000-20200 CHEMICALS & GASES/HERBICIDES	1,500.00	304.44	80.00	1,195.56
0027-22-6110-000-20300 FERTILIZER & SEED	200.00	176.75	12.00	23.25
0027-22-6110-000-21210 PARKS - ROCK & SAND	4,000.00	5,603.14	-40.00	-1,603.14
0027-22-6110-000-21400 TRAFFIC & ST SIGN MATERIALS	1,500.00	2,371.90	-58.00	-871.90
0027-22-6110-000-21910 PARKS - ALL OTHER EXPENSES	66,000.00	59,941.66	9.00	6,058.34
0027-22-6110-000-23210 PARKS - CUSTODIAL	2,000.00	3,602.72	-80.00	-1,602.72
0027-22-6110-000-25000 FUELS	19,000.00	16,129.53	15.00	2,870.47
0027-22-6110-000-25100 LUBRICANTS	1,000.00	467.24	53.00	532.76
0027-22-6110-000-29000 MINOR EQUIPMENT & HAND TOOLS	1,000.00	1,530.14	-53.00	-530.14
0027-22-6110-000-29300 SAFETY & PROTECTIVE SUPPLIES	1,500.00	2,210.04	-47.00	-710.04
0027-22-6110-000-43000 NATURAL & LP GAS	6,500.00	3,188.51	51.00	3,311.49
0027-22-6110-000-43110 PARKS - ELECTRICITY	25,000.00	24,956.82	0.00	43.18
0027-22-6110-000-43200 WATER USE	4,800.00	4,459.35	7.00	340.65
0027-22-6110-000-44000 MOTOR VEH EQUIP REPAIR/MAINT	7,000.00	4,228.48	40.00	2,771.52
0027-22-6110-000-44300 OPER & CONSTR EQUIP REPAIR/MAINT	10,000.00	9,311.00	7.00	689.00
0027-22-6110-000-48320 CONTRACT MOWING	22,793.00	23,410.00	-3.00	-617.00
0027-22-6120-000-10070 NATURALIST/PARK TECH/RD BIOLGIS	60,240.00	56,526.54	6.00	3,713.46
0027-22-6120-000-10090 OTHER/LT	46,937.00	47,154.84	0.00	-217.84
0027-22-6120-000-10100 TEMPORARY & PART TIME	39,998.00	10,073.75	75.00	29,924.25
0027-22-6120-000-29700 EE PROGRAM SUPPLIES	5,000.00	2,816.81	44.00	2,183.19
0027-22-6120-000-42940 MARKETING SERVICES	2,400.00	5,105.40	12.00	294.60
Total - CONSERVATION RESERVE FUND EXPENSE	790,121.00	745,077.01	6.00	45,043.99

Volunteers

CHEERS TO OUR GREAT VOLUNTEERS!

At our annual Volunteer Recognition Dinner in August 2025, we recognized some of our great volunteers with the following awards:

Volunteer of the Year: Jim Mehaffy

This year's Volunteer of the Year Award went to Jim Mehaffy for his dedicated service to mowing trails at Chautauqua Park and his work Boy Scouts and EMS services throughout the county..



Volunteer Group of the Year: Flint River Archery Club

The Volunteer Group of the Year Award went to the Flint River Archery Club for their outstanding service at connecting youth and adults to the outdoors through the sport of archery.



Environmental Educator of the Year: Cora Hermann-Wickham

We are thrilled to honor Cora Wickham, Collections and Reference Assistant at the Des Moines County Historical Society, as our Environmental Educator of the Year! Cora has been an incredible partner to Starr's Cave Nature Center—from captivating our community with her presentation "Starr's Cave: Site History, Stories, and Treasures" on local geology, mining history, and park lore, to hosting hands-on museum visits for our summer campers. Thank you, Cora, for your dedication to connecting learners of all ages with our local history and environment!



Outstanding Service Award: Bickel's Cycling & Fitness

Bickel's has proven to be a steadfast partner to Des Moines County Conservation, consistently going above and beyond to support our mission. Whether through generous equipment donations, reliable gear maintenance, sponsoring local events, or simply lending a helping hand whenever asked, their dedication keeps our community active and connected to the outdoors. Thank you to the entire team at Bickel's Cycling & Fitness for your unwavering support and commitment to local conservation!



Volunteers really are critical to our operations. They help with everything from field work, to youth programs, to department administration. Des Moines County Conservation appreciates all the volunteers that help us throughout the year, and we look forward to being able to recognize everyone in person at next year's volunteer recognition event.

Scan this code to watch the videos!



Staff Directory

Administration



Des Moines County Conservation

Chris Lee
Executive Director

Office: (319) 753-8260
Cell: (319) 572-1564

11627 Starr's Cave Road
Burlington, IA 52601

leec@dmcounty.com
www.dmccconservation.com



Des Moines County Conservation

Jeff Breuer
Administrative Assistant

Office: (319) 753-8260

11627 Starr's Cave Road
Burlington, IA 52601

breuerj@dmcounty.com
www.dmccconservation.com

Field Staff



Des Moines County Conservation

Tanner Grimm
Operations Supervisor

Office: (319) 753-8260
Shop: (319) 386-2071
Cell: (319) 572-8057

11627 Starr's Cave Road
Burlington, IA 52601

grimmt@dmcounty.com
www.dmccconservation.com



Des Moines County Conservation

Tanner Gebhardt
Natural Resource Manager

Office: (319) 753-8260
Shop: (319) 386-2071
Cell: (319) 572-6865

11627 Starr's Cave Rd.
Burlington, IA 52601

gebhardt@dmcounty.com
www.dmccconservation.com



Des Moines County Conservation

Cade Roland
Conservation Technician

Office: (319) 753-5808
Shop: (319) 386-2071

11627 Starr's Cave Rd.
Burlington, IA 52601

rolandb@dmcounty.com
www.dmccconservation.com



Des Moines County Conservation

Brian Havener
Conservation Technician

Office: (319) 753-5808

11627 Starr's Cave Rd.
Burlington, IA 52601

www.dmccconservation.com

Environmental Education



Des Moines County Conservation

Marcus Nack
Environmental Education Manager

Office: (319) 753-5808
Cell: (319) 768-8057

11627 Starr's Cave Rd.
Burlington, IA 52601

nackm@dmcounty.com
www.dmccconservation.com



Des Moines County Conservation

Shania Hansen
Naturalist

Office: (319) 753-5808
Cell: (319) 572-1508

11627 Starr's Cave Rd.
Burlington, IA 52601

hansens@dmcounty.com
www.dmccconservation.com

Board Member Directory

Board Member Directory		
Position	Name	Term Expires
Chair	Ron Helling	12/31/2027
Vice-Chair	Dan Hockett	12/31/2028
Secretary / Treasurer	Kathy Wunderlich	12/31/2026
Member	Terry Davis	12/31/2029
Member	Julie Solinski	12/31/2030

Conservation Board Meetings

- July 2, 2025 WS & RM
- August 6, 2025 RM
- September 3, 2025 RM
- October 1, 2025 RM
- October 6, 2025 WS
- November 5, 2025 RM
- December 3, 2025 RM
- December 18, 2025 WS
- January 7, 2026 RM
- February 4, 2026 WS & RM
- March 4, 2026 RM
- April 1, 2026 RM
- April 2, 2026 SM
- May 13, 2026 WS & RM
- June 3, 2026 RM

RM - Regular Meeting
SM - Special Meeting
WS - Work Session

Big Hollow





**Des Moines County
Conservation**