LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

In early March 2002, we began using an online tracking system called Manuscript Tracker for submitting and reviewing manuscripts in *Agronomy Journal* (AJ). This web-based software allows authors, editors, reviewers, and ASA-CSSA-SSSA Headquarters staff to access or input information appropriate to their responsibilities. All of us—the AJ Editorial Board, reviewers, and authors—have had to learn how to use Manuscript Tracker to one extent or another. Our comfort level with Manuscript Tracker is improving, but we still have more to learn. At the time of preparing this letter (late November 2002), more than 200 manuscripts have been registered in Manuscript Tracker. The support from the AJ Editorial Board, reviewers, and authors for Manuscript Tracker has been very positive.

Manuscript Tracker provides authors, reviewers, and editors with several distinct advantages over submitting paper-copy manuscripts. Submitting manuscripts online using Manuscript Tracker is convenient, fast, and less expensive than when postal services are used. Our postal costs for moving mailings back and forth from authors, editors, and reviewers have decreased significantly since we began using Manuscript Tracker. Procedures that reduce costs without sacrificing service and performance are desirable. Furthermore, we expect to increase service by reducing the time it takes to complete reviews. If editors and reviewers continue to take the same amount of time to complete a review, a time savings will be realized just by eliminating the time it takes to move manuscripts from place to place in the postal system. This time savings will be realized only if editors, reviewers, and authors don’t allow manuscripts to spend more time in their possession. We will have more concrete information about how Manuscript Tracker affects the time it takes to complete reviews as we use the system more in the months and years ahead.

Our international authors should find Manuscript Tracker particularly attractive. The convenience of using the internet and the savings in time and postal costs should be of substantial benefit to authors outside the USA. Manuscript Tracker allows all authors (i.e., the corresponding author of a manuscript) to track the review of their manuscripts via the internet. Editors, reviewers, and authors can access Manuscript Tracker anytime at their convenience. Access in Manuscript Tracker is limited to only specific information necessary for an individual’s responsibilities. In many respects, the advent of Manuscript Tracker has created a fundamental change in how manuscripts are reviewed and handled.

In early 2003, we that expect new user documentation will be available for Manuscript Tracker. This documentation will provide step-by-step procedures for editors, authors, and reviewers and can be printed as needed by the user. The documentation is designed to provide users with detailed information that explains, “if you do this in Manuscript Tracker, you will get this.”

I have appreciated the patience and kindness of everyone and the ongoing assistance of the programmer during the startup phase of Manuscript Tracker. As needed, we will continue to refine the programming of Manuscript Tracker in the future to better serve the needs of all those who use this system.

During 2002, we (Sara Uttech and others at Headquarters and myself) initiated the preparation of news releases of selected papers from each issue of AJ. Authors of these selected articles were invited to prepare an interpretive summary of 400 to 600 words. We provided the authors with information containing suggested guidelines for preparing the news release along with an example. Many authors of these selected papers responded with enthusiasm to my request for preparing a news release. During 2002, the Tri-Societies subscribed to the news release distribution service of the American Association for the Advancement of Science called EurekAlert, which sends out news releases to 4000+ international science media. Since subscribing in late August, four news releases have been sent through EurekAlert and have experienced 3936 views. The Societies have also received several inquiries from journalists requesting additional information (S. Uttech, personal communication, 2002). We will continue during 2003 to invite selected authors to prepare news releases of papers published in AJ. Distributing these news releases through EurekAlert, posting them on the web page of the Societies, and highlighting them in *CSA News* and *New Flash* (the semimonthly email sent out to members) are exciting and powerful ways to extend our science way beyond our profession. If you would like more detailed information about the preparation and distribution of news releases of papers published in AJ, please contact me.

At the AJ Editorial Board meeting held on 13 Nov. 2002 in Indianapolis, IN, we encouraged the board to focus their efforts on assessing the quality of the science found in manuscripts and to spend less of their valuable and limited time on English grammar and usage issues. The managing and assistant editors and others at Headquarters are prepared to address English grammar and usage issues, at least to a reasonable extent and as time allows. We encourage our authors to expend their best efforts in preparing manuscripts with proper grammar and usage and in accordance with established style. The *Publications Handbook and Style Manual* for the Tri-Societies is available online at www.asa-csa-sssa.org/style98. As needed, authors are encouraged to seek assistance from people they know who have skills in English usage and grammar. We also encourage all authors to have their manuscripts reviewed by at least two competent reviewers before submitting their papers to AJ.

We remind our authors, as stated in our *Publications Handbook and Style Manual* (p. 99), that AJ “publishes articles reporting research findings in soil–plant relationships; crop science; soil science; biometry; crop, soil, pasture, and range management; crop, forage, and pasture production and utilization; turfgrass; agroclimatology; agronomic modeling; statistics; integrated pest management; and integrated agricultural systems” (Anonymous, 1998). We also publish Notes about apparatus, observation, and experimental techniques. Observation articles usually are limited to studies and reports of unrepeatable phenomena or other unique and unusual circumstances. Review and Interpretation papers may be published by invitation from or in consultation with the Editor and are subject to review. Contributions to the Forum section should relate to current agronomic issues and questions. Forum papers should be brief and thought provoking. Manuscripts resulting from symposia having appropriate subject matter will be considered for publication as a compilation of manuscripts in a regular issue of the AJ. To allow for the uniform handling and review of symposium papers, the AJ Editorial Board established a policy for the submission, review, and publication