Immersed in agriculture from his first day on earth, Leo Walsh continues to impact the ag community even in his retirement with the continual sharing of knowledge made possible through the Leo M. Walsh Soil Fertility Distinguished Lectureship.

Dr. Walsh was born into agriculture on a family farm near Barnum, IA. Planning on a farming career, he entered the Farm Operation Certificate program at Iowa State University in 1948. Certificate in hand, he decided to continue in college focusing on agriculture education. After serving two years of active duty in the U.S. Air Force, Walsh worked as a vocational agriculture teacher in Iowa until his love of learning and agriculture swayed him to again continue his education. Earning his Ph.D. in 1959 at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (UW) led to a faculty position in the Soil Science Department, enabling him to teach and conduct research in soil fertility and nutrient management. This opened the door to his appointment as dean of the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at UW from 1979 to 1991.

Throughout his career, Walsh promoted nutrient management practices to optimize production and preserve natural resources for future generations. He is described as an “innovator of soil testing technology” by his former student and lifelong friend, Dr. Robert Hoeft, former dean of extension in Illinois. “Early in his career, Dr. Walsh recognized the rapidly developing fertilizer industry was creating a new era in agriculture, shifting production from small diversified farms to large-scale specialized crop producers,” Hoeft explains. “Dr. Walsh developed innovative science-based educational programs for farmers and their suppliers.” His programs centered around soil testing and its impact on efficient nutrient use, resulting in optimal yields while minimizing environmental impact. Walsh collected and summarized electronic soil test data to project where problems and opportunities might develop and shared this information through extension programs.

Walsh was one of the first extension specialists in the U.S. to hold a research position in addition to an extension appointment. Tying extension and research specialists together into one position not only garnered more respect and attention, but also resulted in the development of practical research programs in direct response to problems faced and questions asked by those working the land.

Walsh is credited with the development of the Wisconsin Fertilizer and Chemical Association. Translating complex data into usable information, he worked with producers, industry, and soil and plant analysis labs to improve soil management practices and crop production and address water quality and environmental concerns. Drawn to research that had practical applications, Walsh was one of the first scientists to look at the hazards and possible benefits of applying municipal waste to agricultural land, leading to recommendations and regulations for sewage sludge use. He was appointed by President Reagan in 1987 to the Board of International Food and Agriculture Development. He advised the board on programs to promote sustainable agriculture and protect natural resource in developing countries.

Lectureship Highlights Trailblazers

The Leo Walsh Soil Fertility Distinguished Lectureship was designed to honor Walsh and highlight academic trailblazers who make significant contributions in the area of soil fertility. The lectureship also underscores contributions of industry leaders. Since 2005, these annual lectures have been presented during the SSSA Annual Meeting and have followed the evolution of the soil industry and the impact of soil fertility on society. The lecturers have included Keith

Leo Walsh (left) with SSSA President Bill Pan. Pan gave the Leo Walsh Soil Fertility Distinguished Lecture at the 2015 SSSA Annual Meeting.
Consider making a donation to the Leo Walsh Soil Fertility Distinguished Lectureship Fund. Visit a-s-f.org/donate or call Eric Welsh at 608-273-8081.

Advancing Knowledge and Sharing Ideas

“The lectureship provides the opportunity to not only advance our knowledge of soil fertility, but also brings together like-minded individuals to share ideas and experiences, often generating new ideas,” Hoeft notes. “At times, we need to look back to look forward. The review lectures provided by the lectureship speaks to where the industry began and how we got there, so we don’t repeat our mistakes, which I find especially valuable. My concern is fewer people will be available and qualified to do the work and the research. The general public’s perception of agriculture to be ‘less valuable’ continues to impact universities. University agriculture departments are shrinking, and funding for research is decreasing, making programs such as the Leo Walsh Lectureship all the more important for us to continue and support.”

If you would enjoy being a part of this ongoing effort to honor those contributing to our collective knowledge of soil fertility and ensure that the Leo Walsh Soil Fertility Distinguished Lectureship continues, please consider making a donation. You can donate securely online at a-s-f.org/donate, or make your check payable to ASF, 5585 Guilford Rd. Madison, WI 53711-5801, with “Leo Walsh Soil Fertility Distinguished Lectureship Fund” on the memo line. Contact Eric Welsh, 608-273-8081, for more information.

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