A Day in the Life: Dan Byers

Madeline Fisher

After spending his childhood on a small Pennsylvania farm and studying crop and soil science in college, Dan Byers went to Washington, DC in 1999 as a Congressional Science Fellow for the American Society of Agronomy (ASA), Crop Science Society of America (CSSA), and Soil Science Society of America (SSSA) and never looked back. Now 13 years into his career as a Hill staffer, he spoke with Soil Horizons about how he fell into this line of work and why it has him hooked.

Soil Horizons: How did you first get interested in crop and soil science?

Byers: I grew up on a hobby farm outside of Pittsburgh, PA in a small town called Knox. My dad was a schoolteacher, but he also was a big gardener and had hogs, cattle, and chickens. I also spent summers working on a vegetable farm, picking strawberries and corn and tomatoes. So, that’s how I got connected to agriculture and soils. I also knew in the later years of high school that I wanted to do something with science or math or chemistry—those were my favorite subjects. So, as I was looking at majors in college, I kind of combined all of these experiences and thought, “I’ll go ahead and give this a try.”

Soil Horizons: And how then did you get involved in policy?

Byers: The Congressional Science Fellowship really just fell into my lap. I was doing my graduate research at North Carolina State University on nutrient management associated with hog farms and ammonia emissions from hog farms on the sandy soils they have in eastern North Carolina. But as interesting as that was, I didn’t envision myself working in nutrient management in the hog industry. Then I became aware of the Societies’ fellowship. Karl Glasener (ASA, CSSA, and SSSA’s Director of Science Policy) was also an NC State grad, and he was on campus for some reason. I had a chat with him, and he encouraged me to apply. I should mention, too, that my dad was a history and government teacher in high school, so I always had a secondary interest in government.

Soil Horizons: What did you do as a Congressional Science Fellow?

Byers: I was placed with a congressman from Michigan, Nick Smith, who was a member of the House Committee on Agriculture. And during my fellowship year, I primarily worked on the 2002 farm bill.

Then after my fellowship ended, there was an opening on the House science committee (now formally called the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology), and I was able to work my way in through my year as a Fellow with Congressman Smith. In addition to serving on the agriculture committee, he was chair of the research subcommittee of the House science committee, which oversees the National Science Foundation. So I worked there for him until he retired in 2004 and then went over to the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) through the second term of the Bush Administration.

Soil Horizons: You’re now staff director for the Energy and Environment Subcommittee of the House science committee. Would you explain what that committee does?

Byers: That’s a good question. We essentially have oversight responsibility for most of the federal government’s civilian research and development—everything from NASA to university research to Homeland Security to EPA science. I also work with the Department of Energy quite a bit now. So that’s what the committee does, and I’ve actually bounced around—we have six subcommittees, and at one time or another, I’ve worked on four of them.

Soil Horizons: So this committee provides a way for the House to watch over the federal government’s research programs?