Inside Look at Hosting a National Soils Contest

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On April 21–26, 2013, the University of Wisconsin–Platteville (UWP) Soils Team hosted the 43rd National Soils Contest. It was the first time UWP hosted the contest and also the first contest held within the Driftless Region.

This was a very unique contest for our team. We had just recently hosted the Region 3 contest where we took 1st overall as a team, but we could not compete in the national contest since we hosted it. Dr. Chris Baxter was the main orchestrator of the operation, as well as the team coach, and our team was probably the most experienced team we’ve had since I have been at UWP, which was very useful with hosting the national contest.

The week before the contest, the area around the city of Platteville was inundated by nearly 3 inches of rain. This filled many of the practice and contest soil pits with water and mud, which needed a ton of pumping and digging. Some sites completely sloughed off and sites like the prairie had to be shoveled out. That was a nightmare at times because the mud would swallow your boots while water ran in from the pit walls.

Re-describing the pits was fun for me, though. I grew up in southwestern Wisconsin, and it was eye-opening for me to be able to connect some of the area’s unique landforms to the process of how they formed and what made them what they were. The glacial lacustrine deposits and the pedisediment deposits were the most unique to me. After re-describing the pits, team packets had to be printed, organized, and sent to the correct locations, which was a job in itself. Once we had completed those tasks, though, it felt like it was all coming together and we were praying for no heavy rains during the week of competition.

In the mornings before teams practiced, we tried to get out to the practice sites to pump pits if needed and clean some of the pit faces. The teams that I was able to meet and talk with were very appreciative of our efforts and intrigued with the soils present in our region. Cal Poly was the most interesting team that I met. They were very imaginative, leaving behind gummy worms in the pit walls and decorating a toy Tonka truck with Cal Poly memorabilia.

The weather was cool for the beginning of the week but gradually warmed and the rain held off for the days of the contest. The individual contest went pretty smoothly. I brought up the rear of the caravan to keep everyone in order while taking the highway from the meeting point in Potosi to Burton. We were able to get everyone parked and had plenty of seating for grading, which worked like a well-oiled machine. It started off cool, but once the sun came out, it warmed up in a hurry. I ran the four-wheeler around, picking up the score cards and making sure we had thing covered. I have to give big props to the Rhode Island girl who had developed problems with her leg but was able to get right in there and work at each pit.

The team contest was pretty straight forward to organize. I was able to help set up that morning but had a couple classes that morning to go to after. Around noon, I went back out and helped with the last rotations of teams. The awards ceremony was at 2 pm, so we didn’t have a lot of time after the team contest to get the information into the computer to get our contest result. We may have missed the 2 pm mark a bit, but we had to make sure our final results were correct and tie-breakers were broken. After the contest results were given, we cleaned up shop and made it down to the Historical Second Street where we talked about all that happened and future plans.

From this contest, our team was able to grow and become a bigger family. We were able to go through thick and thin, by working as individual teams to divide and conquer. As one of the senior members, I think the greatest thing I learned from this contest was all the work that goes on behind the scenes. Coordination and cooperation was key, as well as dry weather during the week of the competition. I know that our coach was very grateful for our help, and I appreciated all of our team members’ contribution in the effort. My aunt and uncle, Amy and