Expanding the Horizons of Our Society

Gary Pierzynski

It is my privilege and honor to serve as president of the Soil Science Society of America (SSSA) in 2012 and to provide this guest column for the inaugural issue of Soil Horizons, a new variation of the former Soil Survey Horizons publication designed to better serve our practicing soil scientists. Soil Horizons will be an outlet for articles on applications of soil science of interest to consultants from many disciplines as well as serving as another vehicle to communicate with the SSSA membership and new audiences. I believe the following message will be of interest to all soils professionals whether or not they are a SSSA member.

These are incredibly interesting and exciting times for soil and environmental science. The opportunity to apply the entire spectrum of basic to applied science to critical problems for all of society stokes my enthusiasm for our profession. Consider human health as one of many examples. Food production (both in terms of calories and nutritional value), the preservation of our natural resources that impact food production, air quality, water quality, reclamation of disturbed lands, and the biogeochemical cycling of contaminants can all be related to human health and soils on a global scale. Our expertise is needed as much now as ever. On a related note, SSSA continues to enhance the influence of the soil profession by expanding the number of states requiring certification or licensing requirements for practicing professionals.

This past year, the National Society of Consulting Soil Scientists officially merged with SSSA through the creation of a new division entitled Consulting Soil Scientists. We welcome all new members into our organization, and I am committed to ensuring that the consulting soil scientists are pleased with their decision. This represents a good opportunity to reflect on the original and evolving audience for SSSA. Created as a scientific Society serving agriculture, we are evolving into a Society that serves the scientific community, practitioners, and students for agriculture and all other applications of soil science.

Serving the Larger Soils Community

We have made a lot of progress but still have a lot of work to do. This is consistent with one of the goals of our strategic plan: SSSA will be recognized as an organization that serves all aspects of the larger soils community. Stated another way, one vision I have for the Society is that anyone who has anything to do with soils should consider membership in SSSA as essential. This evolution is advantageous for a number of reasons. One is that we will build a broader and stronger support base. Another is the synergy that comes with the interactions among scientists across many disciplines, practitioners, and students. Practitioners utilize research to solve problems while identifying new research topics.

Students in particular should be encouraged to participate in SSSA activities as early as possible in their careers. The benefits of student engagement in SSSA or other extracurricular activities are clearly evident when they go on to the next phase of their careers. In addition, most successful students identify one or more professional role models, and the more exposure the students have to our profession, the more opportunities there are for mentoring. Soil Horizons is a perfect name for this publication, connecting the concept of horizons in a soil profile with the expanding horizons or our Society.

SSSA is undergoing a period of self-reflection that will make the Society even better than it is today. A task force is at work examining membership interests in reorganization, governing and organization structures related to membership interests and the future needs of SSSA, and the makeup of the board of directors. A report is due this spring and will immediately be considered by the board of directors. A new initiative that I will push forward this year will be a concerted effort to work on a more independent image for SSSA. To be clear, this will and should include all aspects of agriculture that we currently serve but would also be an image that would

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be more appealing to those outside of agriculture. A more independent image will include how we communicate internally and externally, branding, and the possibility of hosting small topical meetings that are clearly SSSA products. Note that such meetings would be in addition to our Annual Meeting with the American Society of Agronomy and the Crop Science Society of America and would likely involve partnering with other scientific societies with an interest in soils. A revision of our website is already underway. The creation of the public service announcements (PSAs) and the associated website for the SSSA 75th anniversary celebration is another example of efforts to brand ourselves through outreach, and I encourage you to spread the PSAs far and wide! See www.soils.org/story. The PSAs are available in both English and Spanish.

SSSA has in fact undergone considerable change in the past 10 years or more. I would argue that many of our members are unaware of the magnitude of those changes. Still, we have a long way to go, and we can be even better. I invite and encourage you to explore your Society. Many of you are familiar with what we provide in terms of publications and our Annual Meeting, but you should also take some time to learn about our science policy efforts; outreach; the breadth of our publications; the benefits that scientists, practitioners, and students get from SSSA; and our governance. If you are not a member, I encourage you to join SSSA (www.soils.org/membership). If you are already a member, please encourage others to join. We are seeking your input this year as we consider the efforts of the reorganization task force. And please plan on attending the SSSA town hall meeting at our Annual Meeting this fall in Cincinnati, OH (www.acsmeetings.org).

For all of you with a passion for or interest in soils, please share your expertise and enthusiasm for our subject with others. Soils are an underappreciated and extremely valuable resource, and only we can influence how society values soil.

Thank you again for the opportunity to serve as SSSA president. I look forward to working with the entire soils community in 2012.