“Legislation is like sausage … You never want to know what went in to it”—Anonymous

After years of waiting in the soil pits and trenches of rural and urban Minnesota, the soil scientists of the Minnesota Association of Professional Soil Scientists (MAPSS) were able to negotiate the legislative mine fields to establish an official Minnesota state soil. This is the tale of MAPSS’s efforts to guide (push, pull, and pry) to have the legislation passed. Read on for an explanation of the title of the article.

The effort started in 1985 when MAPSS formed a State Soil Committee, which was charged with finding a shining example of a soil series worthy of becoming Minnesota’s official state soil. The committee and members worked for a year compiling a recommendation as to the merits of naming a state soil, and at the MAPSS annual meeting in 1986, they reported that four essential criteria should be used by the members for selecting the state soil. The criteria were that the soil must: (1) have its type location in Minnesota, (2) be extensive, (3) be economically important, and (4) be photogenic (teachable). Seven soils were nominated, but one was eliminated because it was a Michigan soil.

Brief presentations were made by each soil’s sponsor, including a presentation made by a member dressed as the French explorer Pierre-Charles Le Sueur (his nominated soil was Le Sueur). Following the presentations, 51 members voted for their choice (ballots were not reviewed during the meeting), and a motion was made and passed to form two committees: (1) a Legislative Committee and (2) an Education Committee.

The vote tallies were presented at the MAPSS Executive Committee (EC) meeting in May of 1987. The Lester series received 37% of the votes (the majority) and was given final approval as the MAPSS state soil of Minnesota. During the 1987 MAPSS annual meeting, the State Soil Committee reported that the EC had approved Lester as our MAPSS state soil. Now the goal was “simply” to introduce legislation in February of 1988 to establish Lester as the official Minnesota state soil. All the members thought their wild enthusiasm would carry any bill through the Minnesota House and Senate. How naïve we were. Now the often silent, but herculean, effort began.

In a special meeting called in March of 1988, the EC learned that before the legislative session that there was actually considerable interest from key legislators to establish a state soil. It seemed there was a good chance we could get a state soil approved during this short session of the legislature. However, as the session started, problems arose which made it difficult to get the state soil approved.

State Soil or State Muffin?
The blueberry growers of Minnesota proposed the blueberry muffin as the “state muffin.” A group of grade school children also proposed the giant beaver (Castoroides ohioensis) as the state fossil. With this being an election year, there was concern that a state soil may seem trivial if introduced with a “state muffin” and a “state fossil.” Besides, how could a group of field-hardened soil scientists compete with cute grade school children and a luscious vision of a “blueberry muffin?”

There was also a peat mining organization that wanted an organic soil as the state soil. Hmmm, how happy would we be with “Bullwinkle” as the state soil? Our legislative supporters strongly urged us to wait until after the elections in the fall, so a decision was made not to introduce the state soil bill in 1988. The state muffin passed, but the state fossil did not pass and was criticized by the legislature because the word “Ohio” was part of the scientific name. Happily, Bullwinkle remained in Frostbite Falls, MN.

At the December 1988 MAPSS annual meeting, there was a presentation made about hiring a lobbyist for the state soil
effort and options for the 1989 session. There was considerable discussion on whether or not MAPSS should hire a lobbyist to promote Lester as our state soil. Consensus of the group seemed to favor increasing publicity of the need for a state soil. Following the annual meeting, the EC met and passed a motion to table hiring a lobbyist and instead work to build coalitions and educate citizens and legislators. Some old curmudgeons in our group grumbled that this decision was based on the habitual “thriftiness” of our profession.

The state soil promotional efforts were placed on the back burner in the early to mid-1990s due to the MAPSS soil science licensing effort. In May of 1995, the Minnesota governor signed the Geoscience Licensing legislation. Rule writing and other licensing-related efforts continued through the rest of the decade. Another decade slipped by, we became grayer and somewhat wiser, and yet Lester remained in cold storage. A gleam of light and a happy convergence of events were to occur to change this sad condition of the beleaguered MAPSS state soil.

A Perfect Storm
At the 2010 annual meeting, it became apparent that several soils-related events were converging, including the SSSA 75th anniversary; the 100th anniversary of the University of Minnesota Department of Soil, Water, and Climate; and the MAPSS 40th anniversary. A few of the old back benchers at the meeting suggested that these events might be the perfect opportunity to get the state soil legislation passed. An article for the spring 2011 newsletter, titled “A Perfect Storm,” was written to outline our opportunity. The Lester state soil flag was once more raised by a few dedicated MAPSS members seeing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Some of the MAPSS members had no idea the “state soil team” had been waiting in the pit all this time.

The article on the “Perfect Storm” was discussed during the 2011 MAPSS Summer Tour. A motion was made and passed to form a “Perfect Storm Committee” (PSC). The PSC drafted a handout and made a presentation at the 2011 Annual Meeting, and members, many who were not born during the original nomination of Lester, gave the committee permission to begin pursuing the various PSC events. Prior to the PSC presentation, Dr. Carl Rosen, head of the University of Minnesota, Department of Soil, Water, and Climate, gave a presentation about the upcoming 100th Anniversary of the department and its desire to work with MAPSS on the upcoming events.

As a follow-up to the annual meeting, the PSC met with Dr. Rosen to discuss the upcoming events. At this meeting, it was learned that the Smithsonian Soil Exhibit “Dig It!” was probably coming to the Bell Museum in November of 2012. Dr. Rosen suggested that MAPSS should pursue designation of Lester as the Minnesota state soil in conjunction with the coming of the “Dig It!” exhibit. After some initial resistance to parting with any spare change, the PSC was given permission to contact a lobbyist about pursuing the state soil. The PSC contacted the lobbyist who immediately recognized that all of the soil-related events represented a significant case for establishing a state soil by the legislature.

In the January 2012, the PSC and EC decided to proceed with the state soil legislation and hire a lobbyist. The PSC suggested the following to pay for the costs: (1) asking for donations from the membership, (2), using existing professional development fund dollars, and (3) putting on some additional soil workshops. An outline for lobbying services and a cost proposal were provided to MAPSS, and the EC gave the PSC permission to proceed on Jan. 31, 2012. The state soil bill was drawn up and provided to MAPSS on Feb. 4, 2012. Now there was only three months left to make our case to the Minnesota legislators. If the small PSC group had any wits about them, they may have blanched; however, blind faith in the importance of soil ruled the day, and the legislative battle was on.

The PSC then began working with the lobbyist to find authors. Criteria for selecting authors were finding: (1) a Republican, since that was the majority party, preferably one in the House and one in the Senate Government Operations committees, which is where the bill would be heard first; and (2) someone who was in one of our member’s districts. Many potential sponsors had been approached, and initially, they blustered excuses about the frivolity of the effort. However, Senator Gen Olson had the vision to see the importance of soil and agreed to be our primary author. Senator Olson was the chair of the Senate Education Committee, and out of the sheer force of the perfect storm, she told us of her experience as a soil judge in 4H. Senator Olson became our soil-enlightened advocate. The Senate bill was introduced on Mar. 5, 2012 and referred to the State Government Innovation and Veterans Committee. The House version of the bill was introduced on Mar. 15, 2012 and referred to the Agricultural and Rural Development Finance Committee.

Eaten by the ‘Sausage Machine’
The Senate heard and passed the bill in committee on Mar. 12, 2012. There was also a bill heard right after the state soil bill, sponsored by a first-grade class, to designate the black bear as the state mammal. Again, it seemed difficult for the hard-bitten soil scientists, now 25 years older, to compete with the shining faces of youth. This bill passed as well. Neither bill received a hearing in the House, which meant we had not made the committee deadline in both houses and so the bill was dead. The PSC group was almost silent and lost, and rumor was we were eaten by the legislative “sausage machine.”

However, our lobbyist and Senate sponsor knew better and conjured legislative magic. Plan B was revealed, which would amend the state soil language to the Senate version of the Agricultural Omnibus bill. The amendment was proposed and passed on the Senate floor on
Apr. 4, 2012 with one Senator commenting during testimony on the floor: “Maybe now we can stop treating our soil like dirt.” The addition of this language to the Agricultural Omnibus bill gave Lester new life. On Apr. 20, 2012, the state soil language was amended to the House version of the Omnibus bill in conference committee (the vote was 10–0).

The House adopted the conference committee report on Apr. 24, 2012 and the Senate did the same 66–0 later in the day. The members of these committees recognized the importance of soil, where food comes from, and where jobs in Minnesota originate. So, 25 years after Lester was selected by the MAPSS membership, Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton signed the bill on Apr. 28, 2012, making Lester the Minnesota state soil. But we were not done yet.

In the print and internet press, until the bill was signed by the governor, the effort was universally panned. After we missed our deadline for a hearing in the house, a teacher in northern Minnesota wrote an editorial critical of the state soil effort and the legislature for not passing the state mammal legislation. A local reporter wrote not only about the state soil amendment but about the black bear. The title of the article was “Dirty Legislation.” The reporter criticized the legislators for passing the state soil bill but not passing any “other” significant legislation. Not only were the legislators chastised for adding the state soil language, but also for not passing the black bear legislation.

Then, almost immediately after the bill was added to the Agricultural Omnibus bill on the Senate floor, a local political reporter began Tweeting about it and was on the radio at least a couple of times that afternoon complaining about the waste of time recognizing soil as an icon of a state economy dominated by agriculture and forestry. Further complaints were heard in the local press from parents of the school children claiming that the soil legislation was only passed because MAPSS hired a lobbyist. MAPSS did respond to this criticism via an email from me directly to the first grade teacher who was working on the state mammal legislation. She called me that same day, and at the end of the conversation, she congratulated us on our success.

Generally speaking, the legislators we worked with were very supportive. Yes, many wanted to know why this was important to the state, but as we moved through the process, our explanations were heard, recognized, and praised. My advice to anyone considering state soil legislation would be to find a passionate sponsor and be ready to convince everyone that recognizing and celebrating soil is important for the citizens of your state.

I am happy to note that a reporter contacted us after the bill was signed, and so I did an interview with her for almost half an hour. The result was a very well-written, positive article about our new state soil. We delivered plaques to six legislators who were the most supportive of our effort. The plaque for Senator Olson named her an Honorary Soil Scientist and the others were for Outstanding Service to MAPSS. We had a large group of soil scientists present at the capitol to make the presentations and take photos. The legislators appreciated them and were all looking forward to hearing more about our educational efforts highlighting Lester, the Minnesota state soil. Now our band of Lester supporters is awaiting the further celebrations of “Dig It!” and soil anniversaries as well as a well-deserved rest away from the legislative trenches.

Senator Olson received a plaque from the Minnesota Association of Professional Soil Scientists naming her “Honorary Soil Scientist” for her work to get Lester recognized as the state’s official soil.

Do you have a tale you’d like to share—good or bad—about life as a soil scientist or an experience you’ve had in the field? If so, email it to Dawn Ferris at dferris@sciencesocieties.org. You may remain anonymous if you like.