Taking Collegiate Soils Contests to the International Stage
Maxine Levin and Cristine Morgan

Note from Dawn Ferris, Soil Science Program Coordinator for SSSA: This time around, we have a tale from the pits—literally. While I never participated in soil judging, those I have spoken to over the years have often said it was the best thing they could have done for their soils education and that it is was one of the best experiences as an undergrad. I know several coaches for the teams, and they love what they are doing. While it takes a lot of time, I doubt they would easily give up their position as a coach. I think it is something I would do if I had it to do over again. So...if you are an undergrad, consider this as something to participate in; from what I hear, you won’t regret it!

A pilot international collegiate soil judging contest was held in Hobart City, Tasmania, Australia as part of the joint Soil Science Australia and New Zealand Soil Science Society meetings in December 2012. Five teams participated with more than 40 students and university coaches. The event, meant to encourage the pursuit of soil science as a career, was so successful that the International Union of Soil Sciences, Commission 4.4—Soil Education and Public Awareness Science, will host the first International Collegiate Soils Contest at the 2014 World Congress of Soil Science in Jeju, Korea. Soil scientists from Australia, South Korea, and the U.S. are leading a global organizing committee to develop this contest, and teams from all over the world will be invited to compete.

Based on contests that have been held for more than 50 years in the U.S., the pilot competition in Tasmania was developed through collaboration between Stephen Cattle from the University of Sydney; a number of other U.S. land grant universities involved in collegiate soil and land judging competitions; Cristine Morgan, associate professor, Texas A&M University; and Maxine Levin, liaison to the National Cooperative Soil Survey, USDA-NRCS Soil Science Division.

Generally, a collegiate soil contest includes students representing a university as a team as well as themselves individually. The students describe the soil profile and determine the primary soil properties that limit agricultural and development uses of the soil. In the U.S., these interpretations follow the land use specifications of the NRCS Soil Survey. In Jeju, prior to the 20th World Congress of Soil Science, the contest will include two days of students practicing their soil descriptions, classifications (Soil Taxonomy and WRB), and making correct land use interpretations. On the third day, they will describe and interpret two soils.

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.