A Day in the Life: Dan Byers

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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. The former Congressional Science Fellow of the American Society of Agronomy, Crop Science Society of America, and Soil Science Society of America has worked for 13 years on Capitol Hill. 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?
Byers: Yes. Altogether, there are about 20 or 22 committees that all specialize in certain areas of government. The science committee is not what they call an “A” committee or exclusive committee, but it's still very important. We have close to $40 billion in federal research that we have responsibility for, so we're proud of what we do.

Soil Horizons: What do you do? What does a “typical” day look like for you?

Byers: I work for the Republican members of the committee of which there are 20 or 22, and I'm essentially there to serve them. Most of what we do is centered on hearings; my particular subcommittee will do maybe two hearings a month.

For example, last week we did what's called a markup—passing out a bill—and a hearing on the potential impacts of E15 fuel, 15% ethanol fuel, on vehicle engines. It's been a big area of concern, and we had a big debate. As staff, we write memos and the opening statements for committee members, we meet with all the stakeholders—lobbyists and others—and we call around to experts. One nice thing about working for Congress is that usually you can reach the world-leading or at least U.S.-leading experts in any particular topic area and use them to get smart on specific issues very quickly. I think one of the challenges we have is to be a “mile wide and an inch deep” as we skip around from issue to issue.

So that was last week. This week, I'm now working on two hearings for next week. One will be on the state of the science on climate change. That's on Thursday. Then on Friday, we have a hearing on hydraulic fracturing and what the federal government is doing to understand the risks associated with it. On both of those, again: A lot of calling around to experts, summarizing information in memos and opening statements, and then we'll think about whether there's a legislative element that comes out of it.

Soil Horizons: How often does legislation come out of these hearings?

Byers: One thing that's changed since I started 12 or 13 years ago is that the legislative aspect has sort of ground to a halt for the most part. We do a lot more of strictly hearings, investigations and messaging, as opposed to writing big bills that eventually make it into law. I don't know that I'd say it's good or bad. It's just kind of the way things are now because of the fact that everything's so polarized.

Soil Horizons: It sounds like you have to come up to speed very rapidly on a wide variety of scientific topics—is that what you enjoy about your job?

Byers: I do, absolutely—that's sort of my favorite thing. And for the most part, these are meaningful topics where you can understand and appreciate why they matter to people. You also get to see both sides. We're Republicans, but I can say this for the Democrats' staff, too: We're able to hear both sides and make assessments because often you have to filter through the biases of the folks who are providing you information and come up with a judgment. On something like hydraulic fracturing, for example, it's interesting to delve beyond the media-driven layer of a particular story to the underbelly of what's actually going on.

Soil Horizons: What do you like least about your job?

Byers: Oh, I tend to get jaded. We cycle around the budget even though we're working on policy issues, and the budget cycle will drive things. It tends to get frustrating because everything sort of gets tabled and then, after an election or during a Christmas period, wrapped up in a giant bill that's passed. Over time, I guess, it can get frustrating not being able to pass legislation in the way that we think about Congress working on paper at least. Also, the traffic in DC is abominable—that's probably my other big complaint (laughs).

But I mean, look, overall this has been a very wonderful experience, and I feel forever indebted to the Societies for the opportunity to come on the Hill. I hope that in my own small way I've given back something to them, too, in being someone with a little more scientific background than most of the staff here. So many staff members have political science and history and liberal arts backgrounds, which are also important and necessary. But I think the intent of the Congressional Science Fellow program to bring scientific expertise onto the Hill is sorely needed and hopefully has been successful.

Soil Horizons: I imagine one benefit of your science background is that while you can't be an expert in all these areas, you're less intimidated and more willing to just dive right in?

Byers: That's exactly right. And just the analytic nature of science...even if I'm not working necessarily on soil science or agriculture, the analytical approach to problems has been especially useful.

Soil Horizons: Along those lines, do you have any advice for students who might want to follow in your footsteps?

I'm not sure there are any set recipes for coming on the Hill. I think the most common routes unfortunately entail sacrifice—just hard work and maybe even working for free. Frankly, most folks who work on the Hill start as interns. They come straight out of college and then some of them stay. (The Congressional Science Fellowship is wonderful, by the way, because you're paid a decent salary. It's a great way to break in.)

So, my advice to folks who are interested is to be prepared potentially for a sacrifice. But it's also very rewarding. I think one year in DC is something that will provide benefits no matter what you do. Even if you don't stay in the city or in policy, I think it's useful. My problem now is that I've been here so long I don't know if I could be productive in the real world if I ever choose to return there (laughs).