Science Societies

True, but useless: Turning big challenges into actionable steps

By Wade Thomason, ASA President

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In a recent book, the phrase “true, but useless” described problems so large—like global food security or climate change—that they feel impossible

to tackle. The authors suggest a practical approach: focus on small, meaningful actions that are easy to communicate and implement. In this column, Wade Thomason, 2026 ASA President, talks about how this is a useful framework for achieving the objectives in ASA's Strategic Plan.

In a recent book, the phrase “true, but useless” described problems so large—like global food security or climate change—that they feel impossible to tackle. While these issues are real, their scale can paralyze progress.

The authors suggest a practical approach: focus on small, meaningful actions that are easy to communicate and implement. For example, instead of saying “live a healthier lifestyle,” recommend walking 150 minutes per week.

When I was a graduate student, Dr. Nick Basta taught my soil chemistry class. At the time, Nick drove a Ford Taurus with a bumper sticker with the tagline “Think globally, Act locally.” In fact, he must have had a supply of these because when he bought a new car, a new sticker also appeared. At the time, I didn’t think very deeply about the meaning of Dr. Basta’s bumper sticker. But as I thought about applying the “true but useless” approach to problem solving and change management, I remembered that sticker and how it suggested basically the same thing as the anecdote in the book. Big-picture awareness matters, but real change happens through tasks we can control and outcomes we can

influence.

Shifting discussion back to the American Society of Agronomy, I hope to use this framework to unpack the work that is going on behind the scenes to address the six broad objectives in the ASA Strategic Plan, I plan to use this forum to provide updates and information on what the Society is ***doing*** to realize each of these objectives and how each of us can contribute and have ownership in the outcomes.

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