Science Societies

Berhe confirmed as Director of the Office of Science, Department of Energy

By DJ McCauley

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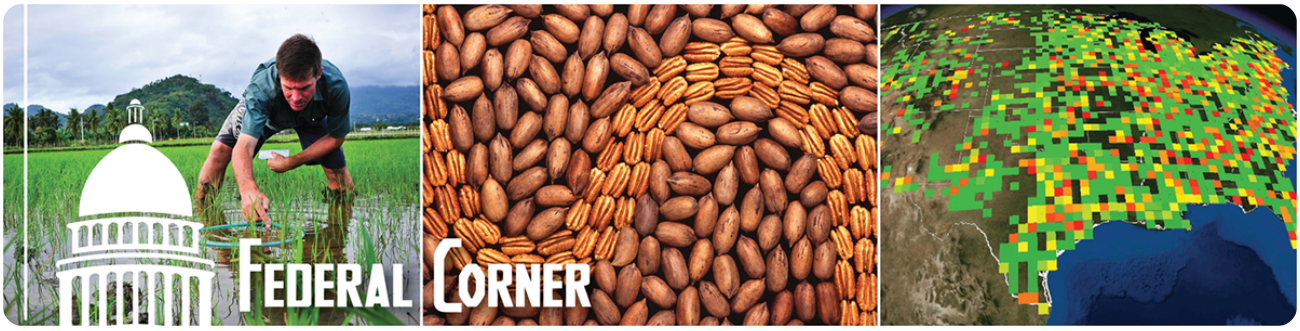

On 11 May 2022, the Senate confirmed Dr. Asmeret Asefaw Berhe as Director of the Office of Science for the Department of Energy (DOE). Berhe helms an office responsible for administering a US$7 billion annual budget directed toward advancing research in the physical sciences—the largest budget for physical science research in the nation. She will report to the Undersecretary for Science and Energy (pending her confirmation, it will be Geraldine Richmond, a physical chemist, who oversees both the Office of Science and the DOE's applied research and development programs). Berhe

will advise the department on directions for research and development, both basic and applied.

“It’s phenomenal to see Dr. Berhe in this position as someone who understands agriculture as a solution for climate change and who understands the importance of emission reduction and soil as a carbon sink,” says Karl Anderson, former Director of Government Relations for the Societies and now Executive Director of the Supporters of Agriculture Research (SoAR) Foundation.

Berhe is a soil biogeochemist who serves as Professor and Falasco Chair in the Earth Sciences, Life and Environmental Sciences Department at University of California–Merced. Her research focuses on the interactions between the environment and soil organic matter with emphasis on how environmental disturbances change this dynamic. She has studied the effects of erosion, fire, and climate change on carbon capture in the soil.

Exemplary Soil Scientist

“Dr. Berhe is an exemplary soil scientist,” says April Ulery, past SSSA president. “It’s so exciting to see President Biden promoting diversity of thought—to bring someone in to make these big research decisions who’s so well grounded in biology and geology, in understanding the physical and biological sciences and making them work together.”

Berhe is a member of SSSA and served on the Membership Growth and Development Task Force from 2017–2020. She’s been incredibly active in a number of organizations, from becoming a Fellow at both the American Geophysical Union and the Geological Society of America, to fostering diversity and equity in her role as co-Principal Investigator of the ADVANCEGeo Partnership.

Berhe received her Ph.D. in biogeochemistry from the University of California–Berkeley and a master of science in Political Ecology from Michigan State University. She completed her bachelor's degree at the University of Asmara in Eritrea.

Communicating Science to the Public

Berhe also has extensive experience communicating the importance of scientific research to the public. She gave a **TED talk in 2019**—now with nearly 2 million views—describing the importance of soil for capturing carbon and helping us combat climate change.

"Whatever consequence you think we're facing from climate change right now, we're only experiencing the consequences of 50% of our pollution," Berhe explains, "because natural ecosystems are bailing us out."

Berhe continues, explaining the complex, multi-faceted relationship among soil microbes, crops, forests, and carbon emissions. She elegantly sums up how we can use soil to combat climate change and reiterates what many of our members know: "We can start by treating the soil with the respect that it deserves…and if we do so, we can simultaneously address two of the most pressing global challenges of our time: climate change and soil degradation."

Berhe's leadership and guidance will no doubt push us closer to the DOE's goal of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

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