Science Societies

Reflections on the January 2019 SSSA stand-alone meeting

April 22, 2020



Awards breakfast at the January 2019 SSSA Annual Meeting.

This article was prepared by members of an SSSA Task Force, consisting of SSSA members Ronald Turco (Program Planning Officer and lead author), Ole Wendroth (SSSA President), April Ulery (SSSA President-elect), Bill Pan (Past President), Eric Brevik, Carrie Laboski, Rachelle LaCroix, Rachel Owen, Matthew Polizzotto, Craig Rasmussen, and Michael Thompson; and ACSESS staff Susan Chapman (Director of Member Services), Nick Goeser (CEO), Wes Meixelsperger (Director of Meetings), Jeanne Pluemer (Senior Meetings Manager), and Sara Uttech (Senior Manager–Governance and Membership).

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the SSSA stand-alone Annual Meeting that took place in San Diego in January 2019 and to present the business and logistical aspects that go into the planning of the Annual Meeting; through this discussion, we hope to increase our members' understanding of the decision-making process for past and future stand-alone meetings. Our three-day joint ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Annual Meeting typically hosts some 4,000 people and 500 technical sessions, requiring 60 meeting rooms in concurrent use as well as an open space for posters and a trade show. Long-term planning and logistic commitments are made years in advance of a meeting as it is the only way to find appropriate space for a reasonable price. We use an unusually large number for platform presentations because of our open speaking format. Even finding a place to host 700 to 1,500 people takes a great deal of work and advanced planning. Changing meeting arrangements requires strong reasoning, forethought, and planning. This article discusses the results of an assessment conducted to understand the background reasoning and planning process, attendance, and fiscal outcomes for the SSSA independent meeting in January 2019.

The first stand-alone soil science meeting resulted from discussions and a decision to host a separate meeting to strengthen the unique identity of SSSA. The unanimous vote occurred at the May 2012 SSSA board meeting that supported the concept of an independent 2018 Annual Meeting to be held at a separate time and location from ASA and CSSA. The 2012 board members were aware of the potential for negative financial impacts with an independent SSSA meeting. Board members expressed a firm conviction that the scientific rationale (see below) for the meeting outweighed the potential fiscal impact and that SSSA financial resources were strong enough to absorb consequences.

Two years later, at the May 2014 SSSA board meeting, it was proposed and approved by unanimous vote that 2023 be considered as a potential year for another SSSA stand-alone meeting. However, the 2014 SSSA board mandated an assessment of the first independent meeting be done before convening another stand-alone meeting. It was assumed there would be sufficient lead time (2018 to 2023) to decide about an independent versus a joint meeting in 2023. Following the January 2019 stand-alone meeting, the board discussed the 2019 meeting on its monthly calls, and a major discussion occurred at the 2019 San Antonio board meeting. As no formal assessment was available, a task force was formed in December 2019 to undertake a formal assessment of the 2019 stand-alone meeting. The task force sought to provide context and information on the 2019 meeting to be used in the discussions on any possible future independent efforts. The task force was chaired by Ron Turco (Program Planning Officer) and Ole Wendroth (President), and the members are listed above.

Findings from the Review of the SSSA Stand-Alone Meeting

Board Rational for the Meeting

The 2012 SSSA board voted for the concept of an independent SSSA meeting to:

- strengthen the independent identity of SSSA from ASA and CSSA and highlight the uniqueness of SSSA;
- reinforce environmental and basic soil science perspectives with less emphasis on agriculture;
- attract new members not primarily interested in agriculture; and



Audience members at the closing keynote of the January 2019 SSSA Annual Meeting.

- meet with other societies (e.g., the Canadian and Mexican Soil Science Societies and the Clay Mineral Society) in a setting to foster disciplinary interaction.

The 2012 SSSA board concluded that the independent SSSA Annual Meeting should remain as broad based as possible within the soil science arena, so that it would be of interest to all SSSA members as well as others in the geosciences. An essential component in the discussions was that the joint meetings with ASA and CSSA should remain the standard format for SSSA's Annual Meeting.

Planning the Meeting

Following the decision of the May 2012 board, ACSESS staff in Madison, WI began to work on the independent 2018 meeting, which became the 2019 San Diego meeting because a location to host the anticipated SSSA community could not be found for a date in 2018. By May 2014, the site for the independent SSSA meeting was in place with promotion and marketing programs following. The San Diego location was chosen with an early estimated attendance of 700. The ACSESS staff from Madison managed the meeting arrangements and then used a smaller number of staff at the site to save costs.

Typically, planning for scientific content occurs about one year before the actual meeting. Unlike the typical joint ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Annual Meetings, scientific planning for the 2019 soils meeting began in 2015 with the formation of a planning committee co-chaired by Randy Southard and Ron Turco. A member from each SSSA division and the Canadian and Mexican Soil Science Societies contributed to the process. We met twice in person and multiple times on the phone. Significant outcomes from the planning process were the following:

- An attractive location was needed, resulting in the choice of San Diego.
- Aggressive advertising and active interaction with other organizations, including the Geological Society of America (GSA), Mexican and Canadian Soil Science Societies, and the American Geophysical Union (AGU), should be undertaken. The planning committee made specific invitations to AGU and GSA, even going so far as to offer member registration fees to anyone who attended the San Diego meeting. We had a booth at the 2017 AGU fall meeting in New Orleans to advertise the San Diego meeting.
- Advertise and run all of the SSSA due dates (abstracts, hotel, registration, etc.) at the same time as the 2018 ASA and CSSA Annual Meeting to eliminate any confusion.
- During the meeting, designate parts of each day to a core area of interest (e.g., soil biology, soil chemistry, etc.) and lead off each day with a keynote speaker related to the theme area of the day.
- Run a Society-wide graduate student competition as a means of encouraging integration and interaction across divisions.
- Encourage member input outside of traditional input from division chairs for the development of individual sessions, etc.
- Encourage all forms of interaction by providing spaces for informal and formal group gatherings.

Attendance at the Meeting

The 2019 SSSA meeting in San Diego had 1,746 total registrations, more than double as envisioned! Total abstract submissions were 1,431 distributed across 820 orals, six rapid orals, 532 posters, and 73 rapid orals/posters. We hosted 233 total technical sessions, 43 symposia, 190 topical sessions, four workshops, and four tours with 40 countries represented. By all measures, these numbers exceeded our expectations

and caused the need for us to acquire additional, somewhat expensive, space for meeting rooms in an adjacent hotel. We attribute the outstanding attendance to a combination of causes, including renewed interest in soils, soil carbon sequestration, the soil microbiome, soil health, and the meeting location: San Diego in January. Last year, 2019 SSSA President Bill Pan provided an overview of very diverse content and highlighted the impacts of the San Diego meeting as part of his president's column in *CSA News* magazine (**https://doi.org/10.2134/csa2019.64.0322**).



Opening keynote at the January 2019 SSSA Annual Meeting.

Finances from the Meeting

Revenues for the meeting were $858,692. When compared with a three-year average (the SSSA position of the Tampa, Phoenix, and Minneapolis meetings), the income from registration, abstracts, and other sources were about 14% higher. On the other hand, revenues from exhibitors, advertising, and online education were 75% lower than the three-year average.

Direct and indirect expenses for the meeting were $862,336. Costs were 59% higher than the three-year average of $542,197 when meeting with ASA and CSSA. This difference was a result of not sharing expenses with ASA and CSSA and greater-than-expected attendance, resulting in a need to rent additional space late in the process. Not reflected in these numbers is the fact that ASA and CSSA bore higher costs at the 2018 Annual Meeting since SSSA did not share in their costs.

The conference lost $3,644 in real revenue (revenues minus expense). Typically, SSSA would have a net positive return of something near $212,000 (three-year average) from our portion of the joint ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Annual Meeting. This

revenue backstops many of our critical member services, including our political advocacy events, career services, cross-divisional programming, and general program enhancement requests. While San Diego was an excellent location for a winter meeting, the location costs reflected the site.

Member Survey Responses from the Meeting



- The survey response rate (18%) was greater than typical for a joint Annual Meeting.
- When asked if an independent meeting should be conducted again, 57% of the respondents said yes while 23.5% said no and 19.4% were undecided.
- Members expressed many of the same concerns we see at the joint Annual Meeting, i.e., many overlapping sessions, limited poster exhibition space, etc.
- The majority of attendees (87%) were from North America.
- The majority of attendees (80%) were SSSA members. First-time attendees were high (32%) and greater than the 21% of new attendees at the combined 2019 San Antonio meeting.

Future of SSSA Stand-Alone Meetings

Some members have asked whether an independent SSSA Annual Meeting will happen again. Others have stated their preference never to do it again. Currently, our program planners are operating without a direct board mandate to hold another independent meeting. The next available time for a stand-alone meeting would be 2027 as contracts are in place for earlier dates.

A discussion board is open for comments at **www.soils.org/discussion-boards/index.php?/forum/129-sssa-meeting-input** and will remain open for month after publication of this article. SSSA members are encouraged to use the discussion board or contact an SSSA board representative to express views about a separate SSSA Annual Meeting. Current SSSA board members have expressed an array of opinions, but the board has not formalized action with a vote. What do SSSA members want to do?

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