Science Societies

Meet the new vice-chair of the North American CCA Board

By Denice Rackley

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Sally Flis, Ph.D. and CCA, is the Director of Agronomy at The Fertilizer Institute and the new vice-chair of the North American CCA Board.

Childhood memories of dairy cattle and walking through crop fields have had a lasting impact on Sally Flis, newly elected vice-chair for the North American CCA Board.

Bouncing over farm fields seated beside her dad (who has been a CCA for 25 years), collecting soil samples, visiting with farmers, and showing dairy cattle in 4H shaped her future. Flis's career has centered around combining her passions for agronomy, dairy cattle, and educating producers.

Attending the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Flis needed an elective and chose soil science. She connected with Dr. Bill Tracey, her agronomy instructor, whose mentorship led Flis to double major in dairy science and agronomy. Tracey provided her with suggestions on how to go forward with both majors. Continuing her education, Flis obtained a master's degree in dairy science specializing in dairy nutrition. Drawn back to agronomy, she attended classes at the William H. Minor Agricultural Research Institute and the University of Vermont to attain her Ph.D. in plant and soil science.

After graduation, Flis wrote nutrient management plans in Vermont and New York, which required CCA certification. "I enjoyed the daily interaction with farmers, giving them facts and numbers they needed to implement changes that would benefit their operations." Working with federal and state government regulations for seven years, Flis was ready for a change. Turning her attention to dairy once again, she worked for Dairy One Forage Lab in Ithaca, NY for more than two years in technical support, sales, and marketing roles.

"All the decisions we make in the field and on the agronomy side impact of the quality and end use of the product, whether it is for human or animal consumption. It is a shame we separate agriculture into livestock production or crop production. I enjoy taking a holistic approach," Flis says.

Currently, Flis is the Director of Agronomy at The Fertilizer Institute (TFI), which is the fertilizer industry's trade association that represents the industry in Washington, DC

on policy and advocacy issues. Flis plans strategies to communicate with delegates, informing them that the fertilizer industry and agriculture as a whole are making the right choices. Working in the stewardship and sustainability departments, Flis speaks with ag professionals and attends many CCA meetings to update the agronomy community on TFI's current research projects and recognition programs. With the 4R Nutrient Stewardship program, she collects, analyzes, and shares data that heighten understanding of on-farm fertilizer practices (right fertilizer source, right rate, right time, and right place) to increase production and profitability while minimizing nutrient loss, enhancing environmental protection, and improving sustainability.

What does it cost farmers to adopt their CCA's recommended fertilizer practices? To answer that question, TFI is collecting data on 45 CCA-farmer teams. "We are building the economic and environmental story for each farm, and the industry as a whole, as it relates to this question." Tracking the direct costs involved with fertilizer application along with the recommendation and results over four years, these case studies are showing what works and what doesn't. "We are seeing increased yields with a decrease in cost and the added environmental benefit of decreasing greenhouse gas emissions." The farmers themselves are now actively sharing their results with others. "Our goal is for advocates and farmers to see themselves and possibilities for their operations in these diverse studies." (Check out **4rfarming.org** to read the completed studies.)

Translating Technology into Management Choices

Flis is looking forward to connecting with fellow CCAs, encouraging them to make the most of the CCA program, and implementing dynamic educational opportunities in her new role as vice-chair.

CCAs bridge the gap between science and technology and on-farm practices, says Flis. “As CCAs, we provide the technical support to farmers, providing them the data to make informed decisions. We help farmers shift some management choices around to see improvements.”

Each individual needs to invest themselves in the CCA program to gain the most benefit, Flis believes. “The value of the program is a reflection of the investment you make as an individual.” She also believes that you need to be comfortable with self-promotion, discussing with producers why CCA certification sets you apart.

“One of the most valuable components of the CCA program is the continuing education program. Certification requires you to continue in the full-system spectrum of education, keeping up to date on information and technology across systems.”

Goals for the CCA Program and Advice for Students

“One of my goals for the CCA program is to offer more dynamic learning opportunities. The most significant space where we see people not maintaining their [certification] is with mid-career professionals, 10 to 12 years in. We need to figure out ways to make the programs more interesting and more convenient for both new and experienced CCAs.”

Podcasts are one option Flis has in mind. The time spent driving between farms is a perfect opportunity to access podcasts, Flis believes, adding convenience to credit opportunities.

Opportunities for young students interested in agriculture is another area of importance to the CCA program and the ag industry in general.

“The agronomy industry as a whole needs to figure out how to do a better job at reaching young people in high school and early college who are interested in a science career but unsure which science to pursue. There are enormous and varied opportunities in agronomy, consisting of both lab and fieldwork, that pay well. We need to explore what resources are needed to reach young people and present these opportunities.”

Flis offers simple advice young students: “Get involved, think of relationships as valuable assets, and take advantage of opportunities.” Since we can’t know what lies around the corner, she suggests activities such as clubs, internships, and jobs can enable exploration of diverse interests while creating opportunities to build relationships. “Make personal connections and build your network as early as possible—maintaining those relationships will be valuable throughout your career. You have no idea where you will end up, so be comfortable making choices in the moment. Don’t over plan, and be open to opportunities.”

For those students who wish to continue their education, Flis says, “Recognize that because you have a Ph.D., teaching at a university is not your only career path. Technological expertise is needed elsewhere besides teaching.” In her current role with TFI, Flis uses her advanced knowledge and expertise to go to Washington, DC to speak to policymakers and their staff about climate change, soil health, and the impact the fertilizer industry has on both.

Life Lessons

With each position Flis has held in her career, she has learned more about herself and her passions and shares the life lessons that have helped her make of the most of each opportunity: “Continue to evaluate your career and position. Find those parts of your job you enjoy and are skilled at and figure out how to make that a bigger part of your

day. Be adaptable to opportunities and change. Move outside your comfort zone—put yourself out there. Make, build, and maintain relationships. These connections will be valuable now and in the future. You can't predict the value of people remembering who you are."

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