

From grassroots to global impact: Empowering our SSSA community

By Aaron Lee M. Daigh

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This month, SSSA President Aaron Daigh turns our attention to the people who make this Society thrive: Our members who bring grassroots energy and innovation to everything we do to impact our global community.

In the previous two months, we reflected on where we have been and where we might be heading over the next 40 years as well as our society in action through committee appointments, task forces, Congressional Visits Day, and gearing up for CANVAS 2026. This month, I want to turn our attention to the people who make this Society thrive: Our members who bring grassroots energy and innovation to everything we do to impact our global community.

Board of directors kickoff and New Year's resolutions

The SSSA Board of Directors kicked off the new year in January by welcoming new members, having members share their visions for the coming year, and diving directly into filling seats on standing board committees and adopting a series of motions to improve policies and the overall experience for members.

I am pleased to welcome our new board members whose terms began in January 2026:

- John Kovar (USDA-ARS) as President-Elect
- Fabian Fernandez (University of Minnesota) as Agricultural Soil and Food Systems Group Representative
- Ekrem Ozlu (North Carolina State University) as Early Career Members Representative
- Mumtahina Riza (University of Central Florida) as Graduate Student Representative
- Ankita Datta (University of Florida) as DEI Member-at-Large

Continuing their service on the board are:

- Past President Samira Daroub (University of Florida)
- Editor-in-Chief Markus Flury (Washington State University)
- Program Planning Officer Shannon Osborne (USDA-ARS)
- Certified Professional Soil Scientist Representative Jacob Berkowitz (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)
- Education and Practicing Professionals Group Representative Clay Robinson (CRC Soil & Ecosystem Services LLC)
- Fundamental Soil Science Group Representatives Vanessa Bailey (Pacific Northwest National Laboratory), Rebecca Lybrand (University of California, Davis), and Ganga Hettiarachchi (Kansas State University)
- Soil and Ecosystem Processes Group Representatives Thorsten Knappenberger (Auburn University) and Ronald Reuter (Oregon State University)
- Agricultural Soil and Food Systems Group Representatives Julie Howe (Texas A&M University) and Dorivar Ruiz Diaz (Kansas State University)
- Ex Officio members Stella Salvo (Chair of the Agronomic Science Foundation) and Jim Cudahy (ACSESS CEO)

At our first meeting, I asked each board member to share a New Year's resolution for their work with the Society. Collectively, the board's resolutions reflect a commitment to advancing the 40-year task force, bringing societies closer together, re-engaging members who have drifted from our meetings, pushing division chairs to think creatively for CANVAS programming, serving as active ambassadors among graduate students, promoting our journals and publishing mission, expanding mentoring opportunities, strengthening engagement with the Agronomic Science Foundation, increasing international membership, connecting with regional professional soil classifiers associations, broadening the virtual reach of CANVAS, addressing AI topics and responsibilities in our field, and bringing K-12 demonstrations to CANVAS in

Portland this fall.



CANVAS programming was a key topic discussed at the first 2026 meeting of the SSSA Board of Directors. Pictured here is SSSA K-12 Committee member Wale Adewunmi talking with visitors about the “Soil Your Undies” activity featured during the “Saturday With a Scientist” event at last fall’s CANVAS meeting in Salt Lake City. Photo by Liz Gillispie.

As for my own resolutions, I committed to four goals: (1) creating avenues for a surge in grassroots efforts and programs within SSSA to leverage the creativity and innovation of our members and empower the networks within and among our divisions; (2) improving year-round engagement between board representatives and their divisions to strengthen the pipeline from grassroots ideas to division chairs to board members; (3) getting the news of what our Society and membership accomplishes out to other societies through their newsletters and conferences; and (4) commissioning a new task force whose sole purpose is to ensure

the soil science discipline sticks around far into the future and is able to bounce back against even the toughest of extreme circumstances.

Speaking of recognizing excellence within our community, one of the most meaningful ways we can support our colleagues is through our Society awards.

Elections and award nominations are open!

Award nominations opened in late January and remain open through late March for most categories. Our awards span every career stage, from student scholarships and early career recognition to the highest honor our Society can bestow: Fellow. If there is a colleague, mentor, or student who has made meaningful contributions to our science or community, now is the time to put their name forward. Taking a few minutes to nominate someone tells them that their work matters and that they are valued by their community. Most awards also allow self-nomination, with just a few exceptions. Visit [this page](#) for more information and to nominate.



Taking a few minutes to nominate a colleague, mentor, or student for an award tells them that their work matters and that they are valued by their community. Awards are open through late March. Pictured here is Wei Zhang being recognized as SSSA Fellow with 2024 SSSA President Michael Thompson.

Elections will open on March 2 with voting continuing through early April. This year's ballot will include positions for division chairs-elect, board representatives, and SSSA president. If you've been thinking about stepping into a leadership role or know someone who should, I encourage you [to learn about the candidates and cast your vote](#). Your participation shapes who guides our Society forward.

Beyond formal recognition, there are many ways to celebrate the work happening across our community. That spirit is part of what inspired two new features I'm launching in *CSA News* magazine this year.

New in *CSA News*: Soil Riddles and President's Research Pick

This year, I am creating two new article series in *CSA News* magazine:

Soil Riddles is intended to create a sense of fun, challenge, and detective investigation for soil scientists. Amazing soils are all around us. We see some quite often while others only on special occasions or during a once-in-a-lifetime trip. My wife, daughter, and I love to travel and have had the opportunity to visit some bizarrely interesting soils. My wife and I are both soil scientists and know very well how excited soil scientists get when trying to identify a soil from a photo or even just a partial core. In that spirit, each month I will share a new riddle. If you are the first to guess the correct **soil series name** and its **geographical location** correctly, I will publish your name along with the answer in an upcoming issue.

President's Pick: SSSA Research is intended to celebrate exciting new research in our journals. SSSA is the sole publisher of the *Soil Science Society of America Journal* and *Vadose Zone Journal* and co-publishes the *Journal of Environmental Quality* and *Agricultural & Environmental Letters* with CSSA and ASA. Each month, I will pick one or two articles among our journals that represent some of the most exciting, creative, and innovative research in our field of soil science. Look for both features elsewhere in this issue.

These new features reflect a broader conversation I have been having about the value of our science and our Society. I recently had the opportunity to share some of these thoughts publicly.

On the 'Connections' podcast series

I recently joined ACSESS CEO Jim Cudahy and the ASA and CSSA Presidents, Wade Thomason and Felix Fritsch, on the new "Connections" podcast series that is being aired through the Societies' *Field, Lab, Earth* podcast. When asked about overarching

challenges facing soil science, I noted that while our field is getting noticed more these days (such as the impressive surge in recognition of soil health and even being mentioned in Hollywood movies), we face significant challenges. These include workforce development and building up soil science programs that have largely remained stationary or declined in capacity at the university level as well as scientific funding and diversifying funding routes for new discoveries in both the applied and fundamental sides of soils.

When asked about priorities, I emphasized that we want to keep the momentum on recent achievements while leaning boldly into areas we still want to accomplish by mobilizing our membership. This includes empowering our dozens of committees and divisions to act boldly and creatively in grassroots efforts by using the resources available through our Society (our network, connections, programs, and staff) and getting our community's work out there and more widely known by increasing our engagement with other societies and sectors.

When asked about the ultimate value of membership, I returned to what I call the "resource of community." Given our community's tremendous breadth and extraordinary depth in our field, a member can lean on their community endlessly and still continue to find new opportunities and benefits, professionally and personally.

Get engaged and make change!

The depth and breadth of the perspectives in soils means we have an overwhelming supply of creativity and innovative thinking among our community. Bolstering the fruits of that is what I hope to see this year, which I think is essential for addressing many of our discipline's and Society's key issues.

To get involved and initiate your grassroots ideas, post in the [Member Hub's Circles](#), present on SSSA to help [get the word out](#) about our Society, stayed tuned in to new opportunities that will be announced through *CSA News* magazine and the *News Flash* emails, and contact your division chair!

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Our 2026 SSSA division chairs are ready to hear from you:

- Forest, Range, and Wildland Soils—Cole Gross (SUNY-ESF)
- Nutrient Management & Soil & Plant Analysis—Christopher Rogers (USDA-ARS)
- Pedology—Felipe Aburto (Texas A&M University)
- Practicing Professional Soil Scientists—Daniel King (TerraGenesis, LLC)
- Soil & Water Management & Conservation—Sandeep Kumar (USDA-NIFA)

- Soil Biology and Biochemistry—Thea Whitman (University of British Columbia)
- Soil Chemistry—Matthew Ginder-Vogel (University of Wisconsin–Madison)
- Soil Education and Outreach— Bethany Wolters (University of Tennessee–Martin)
- Soil Fertility and Plant Nutrition—Bhupinder Farmaha (Clemson University)
- Soil Mineralogy—Aditi Pandey (NASA)
- Soil Physics and Hydrology—Michael Cosh (USDA–ARS)
- Soils and Environmental Quality—Udayakumar Sekaran (Oregon State University)
- Urban and Anthropogenic Soils—Anna Wade (USEPA)
- Wetland Soils—Chelsea Duball (Utah State University)

Stay tuned for science policy updates

Our Congressional Visits Day and House Soil Caucus events will be taking place on Feb. 24–26, 2026. I hope to share highlights in a future column. For ongoing science policy news, check out the [Science Policy website](#) and [weekly science policy updates](#) in CSA News magazine.

Together, our collective and grassroots engagement leaves an indelible legacy for generations worldwide!

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