Science Societies

A conversation with new ACSESS CEO Jim Cudahy

By Kristen Coyne

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“You need to discover the value that you are providing (as an organization) and to understand the relationship you have with your members, certified professionals, meeting attendees, and readers,” says new ACSESS CEO, Jim Cudahy. Photos courtesy of (l to r): Vikram Bisht, Melvin Lahmers, and Brendan O’Neill.

Jim Cudahy was recently named the new CEO of the Alliance of Crop, Soil, and Environmental Science Societies (ACSESS), which provides management and administrative support services to its founding members: the American Society of Agronomy (ASA), Crop Science Society of America (CSSA), and Soil Science Society of America (SSSA). *Crops & Soils* magazine recently sat down with Cudahy to learn more about his experience managing associations, his plans for the Societies, and what he likes to do on his off time.



Jim Cudahy, ACESS CEO

Crops & Soils: We've heard a lot about your impressive career and professional credentials. So, I thought we could start this conversation with a few questions about your life outside the office. How do you like to spend your time when you're not working?

Cudahy: I have three grown children, and over the last 30 years, their interests have superseded my own. For instance, the amount of time I've spent at swim meets dwarves anything I've done for myself. Now that my wife and I are empty nesters, I like to garden, play golf, kayak, and travel. I have a Labrador retriever I dote on and take for walks every day. I like to be outside, to hike, and try to exercise every day. My wife and I love to visit wineries, which are plentiful here in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and we like to cook and try new recipes.

Crops & Soils: What books are on your bedside table?

Cudahy: I have been going through *Soil Science Simplified* for the past couple of weeks. I'm a big fan of Michael Lewis, so I always have one or more of his books nearby. Likewise, whenever Malcolm Gladwell comes out with something, I devour it. On the fun side, John Grisham's and Dan Brown's books.

I listen to a lot of podcasts as well. There's Michael Lewis's *Against the Rules*, and Tony Kornheiser does a podcast I listen to religiously. There's *Rewatchables* by Bill Simmons about movies that are, as its name would suggest, rewatchable, and *Freakonomics*.

Crops & Soils: Let's say ACSESS gives you $500 as a signing bonus, with the proviso that you must spend it on yourself. What would you do?

Jim Cudahy

Cudahy: I might spend it on a MasterClass on YouTube where celebrities teach the finer points of different crafts. I think of Steve Martin teaching you to play the banjo—learning things you might not otherwise think about learning. They have people talking about storytelling, which is a passion of mine. Donald Miller, for example—I'm sort of a disciple of his approach. He talks about the concept of the "sacred bundle of stories" that began with Native Americans, who literally had bags full of rocks they would carry around that reminded them of different stories that could be passed along the generations. I think it's incumbent on any organization to make sure that it understands what its sacred bundle is and that they're telling their story in a way that engages their constituents.

Likewise, the Disney Institute has a program I'm interested in participating in—not sure that would fit within a $500 budget, though. I went to Disney several times as my

children were growing up, and my youngest did an internship there. I think membership organizations can really learn from the way Disney handles customer service and apply it to the way we serve members.

Crops & Soils: You have more than 25 years of experience as an association executive. What are the top three lessons you've learned?

Cudahy: Above all else, as a membership organization, you need to establish and cultivate your value proposition. It is intrinsically tied to your brand, and both are defined more by your members and stakeholders than by the words you put down on paper. You need to discover the value that you are providing and to understand the relationship you have with your members, certified professionals, meeting attendees, and readers, and make sure you are constantly nurturing that proposition and thinking of new ways to improve upon it. But any changes must be made through the lens of members and other stakeholders.

Another key thing is to ensure you're being effective and efficient with your most important asset: volunteer capital, from the board level down to volunteers who contribute content and ideas. You need to make sure you understand what they do, and then make it easy for them to engage. The volunteers are the lifeblood of organizations—that's the same everywhere.

Third is innovation: You need to make sure you're examining your programs and services and comparing them against what else exists in the market, and find ways to deliver new experiences, content, and benefits that will make the organization relevant as time moves on.

Crops & Soils: Let's talk about your leadership at ACSESS. What first attracted you to apply for this job, and what convinced you to accept it?

Cudahy: I was immediately intrigued by the mission, purpose, and vision of the different professional Societies that fall under ACSESS. The general concept of "healthy people, healthy planet" really spoke to me. If I'm going to be investing my time, energy, and thinking in an organization, it's so much more worthwhile when you feel you're advancing policies that are having a positive impact on the world. That is the reason I initially pursued the opportunity and also the reason I accepted it.

Crops & Soils: Membership associations like the Societies face big challenges and opportunities in the years ahead. How do you plan to tackle these?

Cudahy: My initial priority will be to get oriented to the organizations, to fully understand what the challenges are, and then to steadily, methodically make changes that will allow the Societies to grow and be of greater service to the communities they serve. I don't come in with priorities of my own; I adapt to the realities of the organizations and the markets in which they exist. It's probably a safe assumption that membership growth will be on that list, finding ways to reengage stakeholders who have, for one reason or another, allowed their memberships to lapse.

Crops & Soils: You began your career in marketing, and it remains one of your strongest skill sets. How do you plan to leverage those skills to grow the Societies?

Cudahy: From a marketing and communications perspective, I'm a big believer in storytelling. I'll bring that perspective to ACSESS and, with the assistance of staff and volunteers, try to make some subtle changes to the way the Societies tell their stories and engage with prospective members, current members, certified professionals, and other stakeholders. The power of stories can cross into places you never would have suspected. As they say, nobody ever asked for a bedtime PowerPoint presentation. Having a genuine understanding of the various markets in terms of data is important,

but it's likewise important to understand what the compelling stories are that will encourage people to get engaged and afford the organizations genuine opportunity for growth.

Crops & Soils: As CEO, you will play a huge role in the organization's success. But what is the single most important thing that members of the Societies can do to contribute to that success?

Cudahy: Imagination. The best thing members can do is to think differently about what roles the Societies can play in advancing what's most important to the future of the planet. The Societies undoubtedly have had significant successes over many decades. But when you look at the Grand Challenges described in the strategic plans, is there an opportunity to think bigger and to add programs and services that really move them forward, that will allow the organizations to have a larger impact on the world?

I think the answer is almost certainly yes. But it will be the first-hand experiences of members, and their collective energy and passion to pursue new ideas, that will allow the Societies to have the biggest impact on the world they can.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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