



The rise of adjusted fertilizer recommendations and the 1946 establishment of the Soil Service of Belgium

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The scientific branch of soil science was worldwide firmly established at the beginning of the 20th century. In this period, it developed strongly in various countries. During the thirties, interest in soil science and its subfields (plant nutrition, soil hydrology, soil microbiology,...) grew even more strongly, which can be demonstrated by the rapid growth of 'soil research institutions' all over the world.

In Belgium, it was professor priest Joseph Baeyens (1885-1990) who established the first chair of 'Soil Science' in 1935 at the Catholic University of Leuven. He can be considered as a Belgian pioneer in soil fertility research. After having done prospective soil research in the Belgian Congo, the Belgium government supported him to start the same study for Belgian soils.

This innovative soil fertility research was done at the Soil Science Institute of the University of Leuven, which was established and lead by Joseph Baeyens himself. His goal was to determine the fertility norms of the Belgian farmlands. After this large-scale study was done, the fertility norms and associated fertilizer needs could be presented to farmers all over the country. The overall goal was to increase crop production and to minimize fertilizer costs. When Baeyens started to spread his knowledge to the farmers, it would not take long before the demand for his knowledge grew significantly. This lead in 1946 to the erection of the Soil Service of Belgium: an independent laboratory and research institution, analyzing soil samples in order to customize fertilizer recommendations for farmers.

This paper discusses the establishment and-development of the SSB. It covers the period between 1930 and 1950. Following questions will be addressed: How unique was the development of SSB on a national and international level? How did research take shape at the SSB? How did the SSB obtain its place in the Belgian agricultural network? What was the role of the government ? And finally, how did the institution generate and disperse scientific knowledge to the farmers?