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Selected Aspects of Soil Science History in the USA – 1980s to the 2010s

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The beginning of the 20th century through the 1970s were good times for soil science in the USA, with relatively strong funding and overall growth in the profession. However, the soil science discipline in the USA hit hard times in the 1980s and 1990s. Federal funding for soil survey work began to decline as did student numbers in university programs and membership in the Soil Science Society of America (SSSA). Despite this, there were still many positive advances within soil science in the USA during these two decades. There was an increased use of geophysical instrumentation, remote sensing, geographic information systems (GIS), and global positioning systems (GPS), and research began in digital soil mapping, all of which lead to better understanding of the spatial distribution and variability of soils. Many NRCS soil products were put online, making them widely available to the general public, and the use of soil knowledge was expanded into new areas such as archaeology and environmental work, and historic connections to geology were re-established. While expansion into new areas required soil science to evolve as a field, separating the discipline to an extent from its agricultural roots, it also helped reinvigorate the discipline. As we move through the early parts of the 21st century, student numbers are increasing in university soil science programs and membership in SSSA is at an all-time high. Digital soil mapping is being incorporated into the National Cooperative Soil Survey, and the impact of humans on the soil system is being fully recognized. The importance of soils is being recognized by events such as the United Nations declaration of 2015 as the “International Year of Soils”. The expansion of soils into new areas and widening recognition of the importance of soils gives the field hope for a bright future in the USA.