



SOIL AND PLANT SCIENCE DIVISION

Technical Soil Services

Southwest Soil Survey Region

Santa Fe and Las Cruces, New Mexico, Soil Survey Offices (SSOs)

Soil Judging Competition—Southwest Regionals, Los Lunas, New Mexico

Purpose

The Southwest Regional soil judging universities sent their top teams for some hand-to-hand soil description combat at the New Mexico Plant Materials Center in Los Lunas. The teams pit their skills against each other in both team and individual competitions that took place in five pre-excavated and described locations on the farm.

Background

Prior to the competition day, Soil and Plant Science Division staff (SPSD) from the Santa Fe and Las Cruces SSOs cleaned out the competition soil pits and described them in detail (fig. 1). Over a period of 2 days, the staff, alongside the state soil scientist and professor Colby Brungard (New Mexico State University) cobbled together the scorecard keys used to grade the team and individual submissions.

The competition took place on Saturday, November 2, and staff from SPSP soil survey offices joined a cadre of other volunteers from local and distant towns and universities to serve as the scoring committee for the soil judging submissions. Ten hours later, a summary of roughly 85 scorecards was submitted, and Dr. Brungard emerged to declare the winners of the competition.



Figure 1.—Members from New Mexico-NRCS and SPSD spent 2 days describing soil pits to create the scorecard keys for the competition. When you get more than one soil scientist in a pit, plan on a long day.

Key Outcomes

When NRCS and SPSD staff participate in soil judging or similar events, we demonstrate that we are a significant player in the soil science career field and that opportunities abound for these students within NRCS and SPSD.

- The competition provides a platform to introduce students already interested in soil science to our agency staff. There are periods of time during lunch and between events that conversations are had, and questions are asked. This is a great recruiting opportunity, and timely, with Pathways positions having been recently advertised, and more opportunities coming in the near future.
- Community building for the science is a great way to keep people engaged and to make connections that build our career networks. Events such as these pay dividends down the road as we inevitably will collaborate with some of the participants in some way or another. Having met in-person improves communication among participants and NRCS and SPSD staff—everybody wins.



- Competitions such as these enable us to push ourselves to become better practitioners of our craft. At the end of the day, there is more consistency in our products, and the quality control of our work is improved.

Soil judging competitions have been a longstanding tradition in the soil science community. These types of activities tend to attract the most interested and motivated students of pedology. It is critical that we continue to participate at such events and look for more ways to engage young and promising talent in the future.