

Department Chair Named President of Soil Science Group

The International Union of Soil Science has recently chosen Dr. Donald Sparks as its president to begin his term in 2002.

Sparks, Distinguished Professor and Chairman of the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences at the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, is the first president of I.U.S.S. from the U.S. in over 40 years. He will serve four years and coordinate more than 40 thousand members from over 120 countries. The I.U.S.S. (Its predecessor founded in 1924) promotes interaction between soil scientists and hopes to advance the research and application of the field for international soil science problems.

“I think it’s really a great time to be a soil scientist,” Sparks said. “There are so many interesting things to work on. The recognition and importance of the field has never been greater because of all the environmental and food production issues.”

As Sparks begins his presidency, it should bring increased exposure to the University, said Dr. John Nye, Dean of the College of Agriculture and Natural

Resources. “Don is one of the premier soil scientists in the world,” he said. “This just adds to those credentials. I think it will be helpful in attracting really top graduate students to the College and to his program.”

In addition, near the end of his presidency, Sparks expects to bring further attention to the University: He will be organizing and presiding over the I.U.S.S. World Congress of Soil Science in Philadelphia, July 10 –15, 2006. “For me it brings further recognition to the program,” he said. “We have a very strong soil science program. Certainly, the fact that the meeting will be in Philadelphia will bring a lot of recognition to not only the University, but the region.”

Sparks will take over as president after the world congress of the I.U.S.S. to be held in Bangkok, Thailand, in August 2002. His agenda covers administrative and outreach activities. Since the I.U.S.S. is relatively new, he will be addressing organizational issues as well as standard budgetary demands, he said. Sparks also hopes to increase communication and activity between soil

scientists to get as much member involvement as possible.

Educational and public relations activities will also be key, said Sparks. The goal is to try to increase global awareness of soil issues such as deforestation, soil degradation, soil toxicity, and development. "In particular, educate young people about soil science," he said. "My feeling has always been that the average person on the street can relate to the quality of the water; they can relate to the quality of the air; but when you talk about soil quality, I just don't think they think about it."

The Internet will be part of this effort, says Sparks, who also hopes to encourage and facilitate the dissemination of useful soil information to countries with soil problems, especially in the developing world. "That would be a tremendous service to these countries and agricultural people," he said. He stresses erosion problems and that many areas are "taking some of our best land and building on it. Are we going to have soil to grow crops?" he asks.

Sparks will also be heavily involved with educating the U.S. government, he said. He will be spending a lot of time in Washington and visiting with the heads of agencies such as the DOE, EPA, and NSF. "There are just a lot of important issues we need to be major players in. We have things to bring. We need to be at the table."