

## The Tale of a Licensing State

Alexis Jones

It is true. On Apr. 8, 2011, Virginia's bill for licensing professional soil scientists was signed by Gov. Bob McDonnell. What a fine accomplishment to add to Virginia's books! I am very proud of the role of our group—The Virginia Association of Professional Soil Scientists (VAPSS)—in making this happen. We supported the effort physically (attending sessions/hearings, writing letters, and making phone calls in many 11th-hour situations), mentally, and financially (we raised over \$11,000). Also a huge thank you to the Hillbridge Group (Aimee Perron Siebert and assistant Lauren Bull) for their amazing support and guidance through the whole process. I will tell you that lobbyists are well worth their time and expertise! You can view Virginia's final bill, as adopted into law, at: <http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?111+ful+HB1734ER2>.

Here is a short overview of our efforts in the Virginia General Assembly (GA) for 2011. In September and November 2010, VAPSS board members spent countless hours arranging meeting times/locations and attending meetings with delegates and senators that would be on our committees (general laws) in the House and Senate. We met with delegates/senators from places all around the Commonwealth—from Chesapeake, Manassas, Petersburg, Galax—you name it, and our board members were there making our name known. By mid-November, we had commitments from Sen. Jill Holtzman Vogel and Delegate Charles Carrico as our sponsors for GA 2011! And the bill

drafting began and was ready for review on Jan. 7, 2011, just days before the start of GA 2011.

### Dealing with Opposition

What about all of the potential opposition out there (professional engineers, Authorized Onsite Soil Evaluators, the Virginia Health Department, the Home Builders Association, etc.)? The VAPSS board members first met, in late November, with the Professional Engineering Association's legislation liaison to explain our efforts and make them aware that we were not against them. Our goal was to raise the level of professionalism within the Commonwealth of Virginia and to maintain a field of qualified, licensed experts—professionals who can interpret and characterize soils for the protection of life, property, health, and public welfare in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The engineering group's liaison seemed to understand but offered a few tips and pointers. He then took our information to the large engineering/architect legislation roundtable, and that's where we found our first major opposition. It was not about the bill content itself, but rather they felt we must go through a one-year Department of Professional and Occupational Regulation (DPOR) review, so off to DPOR we went. We were informed that the DPOR study period was only a tool that the GA could utilize if found necessary, but it was not mandatory. Within hours, DPOR relayed that message to the engineers, but they still elected to oppose us!



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Alexis Jones is president of the Virginia Association of Professional Soil Scientists.

So on we went, meeting with the Home Builders of Virginia (no opposition there) and writing letters to the Virginia Health Department (they had some clarifying amendments to our bill), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (no support or opposition received), Virginia Onsite and Wastewater Recycling Association (voiced some concern but was quickly clarified by our excellent VAPSS response team), DPOR (added clarifying amendments), and others (my memory has faded those laborious/nerve-cracking hours away). So here it was, the eve of GA 2011 (January 12 to be exact), and we were ready. We had our patrons, our lobbyist, and everyone seemed to be in support (except the darn engineers). But then we hear an hour before our first hearing that the engineers have decided *not* to oppose us!

We were heard first by the House of Delegates—General Law subcommittee (HB 1734)—and we passed uncontested 8–0. Then we were heard by the full committee days later uncontested again 22–0! After that we moved onto the Senate—General Laws subcommittee (SB 1265) where we passed 15–0. And then on to the full committee, passing 38–0!

### On to the Governor's Desk

But wait—the governor has to review and sign the bill, but no worries, it went

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through both the House and the Senate uncontested, so this shouldn't be an issue right? Not exactly. Soon action alert messages were flooding the governor's office, and we heard he was going to veto our bill because he is not supposed to like more regulation. So finally after a few days of screaming at the top of our lungs, making phone calls, and writing letters, the governor decided he needed to add a few words to our bill to make it seem as though he had reason to question our bill—possibly veto it. Well after an amazing response from our members and our affiliates (especially the Soil Science Society of America—thank you!), our bill was adopted into law on Apr. 8, 2011. So as of June 30, 2013, all current Virginia Certified Professional Soil Scientists (CPSS) will become licensed professional soil scientists on July 1, 2013 (please note, you still need to fill out the application for the state).

Again, a huge thank you to everyone who helped out in the countless 11th hours with calls, writing letters, researching responses, and making visits to the GA (some made two- to three-hour drives to be there). Everything VAPSS did truly paid off. We have been chasing licensure since the mid-1980s, and now we are licensed!

My words of wisdom for states seeking licensure in the future is to first talk with all potential stakeholders and opposition. Being up front with them and educating them on the importance soil science plays in our everyday life is of the utmost importance. We need them to understand that we, soil scientists, are here to professionally interpret and characterize soils for the protection of life, property, health, and the public welfare of our country.

If you have any questions or would like assistance in your licensure efforts, please feel free to contact me, Alexis Jones, at [dirt\\_rocks@yahoo.com](mailto:dirt_rocks@yahoo.com).

Keep diggin!

*Do you have a tale you'd like to share—good or bad—about life as a soil scientist or an experience you've had in the field? If so, email it to Dawn Ferris at [dferris@sciencesocieties.org](mailto:dferris@sciencesocieties.org). You may remain anonymous if you like.*