

Recognizing Women in NRCS



Debbie Surabian

STATE SOIL SCIENTIST

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State Soil Scientist Debbie Surabian has worked for NRCS for 23 years. She began her career with the Soil Conservation Service (NRCS was formerly known as SCS) as an Earth Team volunteer. After college, she took a position in Florida as a soil conservationist. She returned to Connecticut as a soil scientist and was later selected as the MLRA 12-6 Soil Survey Office Leader serving Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. In 2010, she participated in a National Soil Survey Center detail to Hungary and Belgium.

Today, she is writing a new chapter in the history of NRCS as the first female to hold the position of State Soil Scientist for Connecticut and Rhode Island. She is an active member of the Coastal Zone Soil Survey Focus Team where she assists the soil survey division in improving work methods. As Connecticut's GPR certified operator, she works with scientists and partners to find objects and features hidden below ground.

Debbie Surabian is a great inspiration for a new generation of soil scientists, and during Women's History Month, we celebrate her contribution to NRCS. Below are some details and memories about her life.

Hometown location and how it influenced you ...

I spent every day outside on our small farm in Willington, Connecticut. We grew a lot of our own food, we raised many pets. My first job was working for my best friend's parents on their dairy farm. I fed animals and cleaned pens year round, picked rocks from the fields in the spring, and hayed all summer. It was hard work, but it was the best job ever. My friend and I still spend time together riding horses.

Education history ...

While volunteering with SCS, I realized I could make a career out of digging holes to look at soils, and working with farmers. I quickly switched my major to Agronomy and graduated from the University of Connecticut. After graduation, the immediate need for health insurance led me to a job in the private sector at an environmental lab. I liked the chemistry, but not the chemicals. I applied to SCS and got the soil conservationist job in the San Antonio, Florida field office. I came back as a soil scientist to complete my master's degree in Soil Science with a graduate certificate in GIS. Yes, you can complete a graduate degree and work full-time!

Memorable NRCS moment ...

One of the best days was in Florida when a district manager asked me to attend an environmental review at Anclote Key Preserve State Park. I saw dolphins jumping in the waves of the boat, jumped into green-blue warm water off the boat onto a sandy beach, toured a snake infested island, climbed a lighthouse, and ended the day with a grouper sandwich. Every day is still an adventure.

What do you enjoy most about your career with NRCS?

My career doesn't feel like a job because I find it interesting. I enjoy helping others understand and use soils information by developing soil interpretations or giving training. I find ground-penetrating radar fascinating. I am fortunate to have seen many places and soils across the U.S. and in other countries to build upon my local knowledge. It is amazing working with so many different groups and individuals who share a common interest in soils and GPR.

How is your role important to conservation efforts in Connecticut?

Soil scientists provide the framework to connect soil and people to improve conservation efforts. NRCS has the largest scientific soils database in the world -- National Soils Information System (NASIS) -- that is paired with spatial soil survey mapping on Web Soil Survey. Access to, and

use of, this information is important in any conservation effort. Soil scientists also tend to have more innovative approaches to conservation like researching soil health parameters. They can tackle projects that need specialized skills like flagging wetlands or using GPR to locate shallow bedrock. Soil scientists really help develop the next generation of conservationists.

What motivates you in your work?

For me, NRCS has a large-scale hometown feel. I've been fortunate to work with a diverse group of partners, landowners, and NRCS staff from all over the country who share their knowledge and challenge me along the way. Motivated by what others have done for me and wishing everyone loved what they do, I make time to take on Earth Team volunteers.

Would you share some of the things that make you uniquely you?

I'm fortunate to have an awesome brother and husband, good friends, and parents that never said *you can't do that*. I started working in grade school and managed my own time, biking to work at the dairy farm and calling for a ride home late at night. Riding horses around town was a normal adventure that still happens today -- just in a different town, when it's not super cold, and I don't cross highway bridges anymore. My brother got me into riding stand-up jet skis, snowmobiles, and ATVs in my early teens. We still ride together, and he is good

at challenging me when I doubt myself -- as are my Percheron horse and German Shepherd dogs. My husband taught me that life isn't easy for a lot of people and to be more thoughtful.

How has your journey shaped you?

I prefer to watch and listen more than talk, but I do ask a lot of questions. I would say that I am a positive person who can enjoy the simple things in life, but of course of who wouldn't want more!

Do you have any recommendations for women that would like to follow a similar path?

A district conservationist named Daniel Oliver once told me that if I ever found myself not knowing an answer to a question, I should tell the customer *I don't know, but I will get back to you with the answer*. He really watched out for me, as did the Mellie Martin, a Farm Service Agency employee. I cannot thank them enough for supporting me, and I hope you do the same for women in your circle. For women who want to be soil scientists, I recommend finding people who you can go to for advice, want to help you learn, and want to see you succeed. Build your field soil survey mapping skills first so you can do a great job in other soil positions. I was fortunate to find -- and still have -- many willing co-workers to help me along the way. I also came upon people who questioned women in this field, but I took it as a chance to educate them. Never give up on your dream job!