“Legislation is like sausage… You never want to know what went in to it.” Anonymous.

After years of waiting in the soil pits and trenches of rural and urban Minnesota, the soil scientists of the Minnesota Association of Professional Soil Scientists (MAPSS) were able to establish an official Minnesota State Soil. This is the story of MAPSS’ efforts to guide (push, pull and pry) the legislation that was passed in 2012.

The effort started when MAPSS formed a State Soil Committee in 1985. The committee was charged with finding a shining example of a soil series worthy of becoming Minnesota’s official state soil. At the MAPSS Annual meeting in 1986, brief presentations were made about six soil series by each soil’s sponsor, including a presentation made by a member dressed as the French Explorer Pierre-Charles Le Sueur (his nominated soil was Le Sueur). Following the presentations, 51 members voted for their choice. The Lester series received 37% of the votes (the majority) and was given final approval as the MAPSS State Soil of Minnesota. Now the goal was “simply” to introduce legislation in February of 1988 to establish the Lester series as the Official Minnesota State Soil.

In a special March 1988 MAPSS Executive Committee (“EC”) meeting, the EC learned that before the legislative session, there was actually considerable interest from key legislators to establish a state soil. However, as the session started, problems arose which would make it difficult to get the state soil approved. MAPSS decided not to introduce the state soil legislation and, instead, to work on promoting “Lester.”

The State Soil promotional efforts were placed on the back burner in the early to mid-1990s, due to the MAPSS Soil Science Licensing effort. In May of 1995, the Minnesota governor signed the Geoscience Licensing legislation. Rule writing and other licensing-related efforts continued through the rest of the decade and Lester remained in cold storage.

At the 2010 MAPSS Annual Meeting, a Perfect Storm was revealed. As luck would have it, several soil related events were converging, including the Soil Science Society of America 75th Anniversary, the 100th Anniversary of the University of Minnesota Department of Soil Water and Climate (DSWC) and the MAPSS 40th Anniversary.

At the 2011 MAPSS Annual Meeting, members, many who were not born during the original nomination of Lester, gave the Perfect Storm Committee (PSC) permission to begin pursuing the various PSC events.

Following the Annual Meeting, the PSC learned that the Smithsonian Soil Exhibit ‘Dig-It’ was probably coming to the Bell Museum in November of 2012 and it was suggested that MAPSS should pursue designation of Lester as the Minnesota State Soil in conjunction with the coming of Dig-it. The PSC contacted the lobbyist that was used in
the soil science licensing effort in the 90s and the lobbyist immediately recognized that all of the soil related events represented a significant case for establishing a state soil by the legislature.

In January, 2012, the PSC was given permission by the Executive Committee to proceed with hiring a lobbyist to pursue the state soil legislation and to find authors for the bill. The Senate heard and passed the bill in committee on March 12, 2012. Unfortunately, the bill did not receive a hearing in the House because we had not made the House committee deadline. The bill was almost certainly dead.

However, our lobbyist and Senate sponsor knew better and conjured legislative magic. Their plan was to amend the state soil language to the Senate version of the Omnibus Agricultural bill. The amendment was proposed and passed on the Senate floor. One Senator commented during testimony on the floor – “maybe now we can stop treating our soil like dirt.” The addition of this language to the Omnibus Agricultural bill gave Lester new life. The state soil language was amended to the House version of the Omnibus Agricultural bill in conference committee (the vote was 10-0).

The House adopted the conference committee report on April 24, 2012 and the Senate did the same later in the day. The members of these committees recognized the importance of soil, where food comes from and where jobs in Minnesota originate. On April 28, 2012, twenty-five years after Lester was selected by the MAPSSS membership, Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton signed the bill designating Lester Soil the Minnesota State Soil.