

British Society of Soil Science holding conference on soil management and monitoring to mark World Soil Day

The British Society of Soil Science (BSSS) and the Soil Science Society of Ireland (SSSI) are holding a joint Annual Conference from Monday 4 – Tuesday 5 December in Belfast. The overall conference theme is Soil Management and Monitoring. The packed two-day event, set in the historic Assembly Buildings Conference Centre in the heart of Belfast, will provide delegates with the opportunity to see the latest research and developments within soil science. The event which received financial support through the Belfast and Northern Ireland conference subvention scheme provided by Tourism Northern Ireland and Belfast City Council, is another notable event in the city this year.

Deborah Collins, Head of Business Events at Visit Belfast commented:

“We are thrilled to welcome the British Society of Soil Science conference to Belfast in December. Business events are a major part of the city’s growing tourism economy, generating around £40 million of direct expenditure and supporting local venues, hotels, restaurants, bars and transport providers. Belfast was recently crowned the ‘World’s best conference destination’ at the recent C&IT awards for the 3rd consecutive year, and delegates arriving into the city will experience the warm welcome we are famous for, as well as the buzz of Belfast in the run up to the festive period. It has been a joy to work in partnership with the society, and we wish you every success with this prestigious event.”

To mark World Soil Day (5 December 2023), BSSS and SSSI are collaborating with the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to provide a scientific field tour for delegates at the conference, to learn about their Soil Nutrient Health Scheme that is being rolled out across Northern Ireland.

The Soil Nutrient Health Scheme is a £37 million scheme funded by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and is the largest baseline soil sampling programme ever undertaken. Significant organisation and planning by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), and their sub-contractors is required to ensure the smooth roll-out and execution of the scheme. It is being rolled out on a zonal basis with all the zones completed by 2026. All category 1 farmers will be given the opportunity to join the scheme.

Pieter-Jan Schön, Director -EMSD, AFBI commented:

“AFBI is embracing this eagerly anticipated flagship event which coincides with World Soil Day celebrations across the globe. We were honoured to host the Patron of the British Society of Soil Science, the Duke of Gloucester at AFBI Hillsborough in October in the lead up to this major event.

We have pride in sharing the success and emerging themes from the world leading Soil Nutrient Health Scheme with delegates during the conference programme. The event also provides a golden opportunity to learn more about the latest developments from eminent soil scientists and to gain a wider perspective from the represented policymakers in attendance."

This year's theme for World Soil Day is *Soil and Water: a source of life*.

Soil and water provide the foundation for food production, ecosystems, and human well-being. Healthy soils, enriched with organic matter, play a crucial role in regulating water retention and availability. Improved soil and water management improves the land's capacity to withstand extreme climate events such as droughts, floods and sand/dust storms.

Given the increased need and pressure to address climate change and other global problems that will affect the sustainable future of our planet, World Soil Day is ever more pertinent. 95% of the food we eat comes from soil, meaning that it is essential to our health and the health of the planet. However, if our soil is not managed, maintained or used sustainably, we will not be able to produce enough food or benefit from the other functions that soil provides to society.

World soil health is under pressure from several threats including erosion, loss of soil organic carbon and biodiversity, pollution, and salinisation. Soil nutrient loss is a major soil degradation process threatening nutrition and is recognized as being among the most important problems at a global level for food security and sustainability. With unprecedented and growing demands for food, water and energy, there is an urgent need to address the challenges of climate change and land degradation, whilst protecting soil as a natural resource.

Soil holds the key to our planet's past and future and is the answer to our food, water and energy security, mitigating and adapting to climate change, the safeguarding of biodiversity, and the protection of human health. We must focus on maintaining and restoring our soils, finding solutions to meeting environmental targets, achieve climate neutrality, zero pollution, sustainable food provision and a resilient and biodiverse environment. Many of the UN Sustainable Development Goals cannot be achieved without healthy soils, sustainable land use and strong policy.

Jack Hannam, President of the British Society of Soil Science commented:

"One key tool to support sustainable soil management for people and planet is action from the ground up supported by strong and effective policy. The implementation of Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs soil health and nutrient sampling programme and the recent UK Parliamentary Soil Health Inquiry have demonstrated positive action in this space. We will take a deeper dive in our conference in a keynote soil policy session. This is delivered by soil policy representatives from all UK nations and Ireland, giving an overview of key governmental activities in the monitoring and management of soils."

By working in collaboration, the British Society of Soil Science and the Soil Science Society of Ireland, along with conference partners the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute and VisitBelfast, are providing a platform to further knowledge and discourse about soils and ensure that soils stay high on the agenda.

Saoirse Tracy, Chair of the Soil Science Society of Ireland commented:

“It has been a real pleasure working with BSSS for this joint conference. It is not the first joint BSSS/SSSI event and I know it will not be the last. I am really looking forward to connecting with collaborators and colleagues in Belfast. The support BSSS gives to its Early Career members is something I had the privilege of experiencing during my own PhD and it is great to see it continue in Belfast in 2023. Thanks to the BSSS staff for all their help and support in organising the conference.”

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The Soil Nutrient Health Scheme enables Northern Ireland farmers to optimise crop nutrient applications, assess on-farm carbon stocks and build farm resilience.

For more information about the AFBI Soil Nutrient Health Scheme
<https://www.afbini.gov.uk/articles/soil-nutrient-health-scheme>