**How Soil Surveys Were Made**

Over the years many landowners have wondered how and when soil types were determined and how soil surveys were completed. The following should give a good idea of how this seemingly insurmountable task was accomplished. Major fieldwork for the initial *Athens County Soil Survey* was completed in 1980. Soil names and descriptions were approved in 1981.

Soil surveys were made to provide information about the soils in the survey area. The information includes a description of the soils and their location and a discussion of the suitability, limitations, and management of the soils for specified uses. Soil scientists observed the steepness, length, and shape of slopes; the general pattern of drainage; the kinds of crops and native plants growing on the soils; and the kinds of bedrock. They dug many holes to study the soil profile, which is the sequence of natural layers, or horizons, in a soil. The profile extends from the surface down into the unconsolidated material in which the soil formed. The unconsolidated material is devoid of roots and other living organisms and has not been changed by other biologic activity.

The soils in the survey area occur in an orderly pattern that is related to the geology, the landforms, relief, climate, and the natural vegetation of the area. Each kind of soil is associated with a particular kind of landscape or with a segment of the landscape. By observing the soils in the survey area and relating their position to specific segments of the landscape, a soil scientist develops a concept, or model, of how the soils were formed. Thus, during mapping, this model enables the soil scientist to predict with considerable accuracy the kind of soil at a specific location on the landscape.

Commonly, individual soils on the landscape merge into one another as their characteristics gradually change. To construct an accurate soil map, however, soil scientists must determine the boundaries between the soils. They can observe only a limited number of soil profiles. Nevertheless, these observations, supplemented by an understanding of the soil-landscape relationship, are sufficient to verify predictions of the kinds of soil in an area and to determine the boundaries.

Soil scientists recorded the characteristics of the soil profiles that they studied. They noted soil color, texture, size and shape of soil aggregates, kind and amount of rock fragments, distribution of plant roots, acidity, and other features that enable them to identify soils. After describing the soils in the survey area and determining their properties, the soil scientists assigned the soils to taxonomic classes (units). Taxonomic classes are concepts. Each taxonomic class has a set of soil characteristics with precisely defined limits. The classes are used as a basis for comparison to classify soils systematically. The system of taxonomic classification used in the United States is based mainly on the kind and character of soil properties and the arrangement of horizons within the profile. After the soil scientists classified and named the soils in the survey area, they compared the individual soils with similar soils in the same taxonomic class in other areas so that they could confirm data and assemble additional data based on experience and research.

While a soil survey is in progress, samples of some of the soils in the area generally are collected for laboratory analyses and for engineering tests. Soil scientists interpreted the data for these analyses and tests as well as the field-observed characteristics and the soil properties in terms of expected behavior of the soils under different uses. Interpretations for all of the soils were field tested through observation of the soils in different uses under different levels of management. Some interpretations are modified to fit local conditions, and new interpretations sometimes are developed to meet local needs. Data were assembled from other sources, such as research information, production records, and field experience of specialists. For example, data on crop yields under defined levels of management were assembled from farm records and from field or plot experiments on the same kinds of soil.

Predictions about soil behavior are based not only on soil properties but also on such variables as climate and biological activity. Soil conditions are predictable over long periods of time, but they are not predictable from year to year. For example, soil scientists can state with a fairly high degree of probability that a given soil will have a high water table within certain depths in most years, but they cannot assure that a high water table will always be at a specific level in the soil in a specific date.

After soil scientists located and identified the significant natural bodies of soil in the survey area, they drew the boundaries of these bodies in aerial photographs and identified each as a specific map unit. Aerial photographs show trees, buildings, fields, roads, and rivers, all of which help in locating boundaries accurately.

**Update!** Although the footprint of our soil is unchanged, soil scientists continue to work on updating soils descriptions to match surrounding counties and to develop more accurate nomenclature for our soils naming system.