Careers in Weed Science

Nick Steppig: Field Biologist, BASF

Primary duties

I am a Field Biologist with BASF at our Midwest Research Farm, just outside of Champaign, Illinois. My primary responsibilities revolve around conducting small plot research for crop protection products (mainly herbicides, but also some fungicides, insecticides, and seed treatments as well) in the pre-commercial stages of development. At the farm, my day-to-day tasks can include planting, spraying, and evaluating corn and soybean research trials, summarizing data, and interacting with visitors during field days. Outside of my role at the farm, I also I coordinate with university and private contract researchers in Indiana and Michigan to address research needs in sugar beet, potato, dry bean, turfgrass, ornamentals, and other systems.

What do you love about your job?

It's hard to pick just one thing, but I love that every day I get to do something different. Outside of the typical planting, spraying, and rating plots that initially drew me into weed science, I also get to collaborate with others within BASF to tackle some of our digital agriculture projects (flying plots with drones, for instance), as well as work with project leaders on testing new products in the field.

What is exciting about the future of weed science?

I think the most exciting thing about the future of weed science can be summed up in one word - **evolution**. The evolution of herbicide resistant weeds certainly isn't something to be excited about. However, as weed scientists, we continue to evolve and innovate to meet the current and future challenges associated with managing weeds. The development of new tools and technologies for weed management in the years to come will present many opportunities for people with a vast array of skillsets and interests. The future of weed science includes traditional agronomy-related and lab-based roles, but is evolving to include data scientists, computer scientists, and a whole host of others. There is a niche for anyone in weed science!

Involvement in Professional Societies

Weed Science Society of America
- Public Awareness Committee 2019-pres.
- Graduate Student Org. President 2019
- Graduate Student Org. Vice-Pres. 2018

North Central Weed Science Society
Southern Weed Science Society

Education

B.S. 2015 University of Illinois
M.S. 2017 University of Arkansas
Ph.D. 2022 Purdue University

Path to Current Role

Graduate Research Assistant, 6 yr

Internship DuPont

Internship Pioneer

Internship Dow AgroSciences

Other interests?

I am an avid sports fan and love watching St. Louis Cardinals baseball and University of Illinois basketball!

If you are interested to hear more about Nick or ask any questions, you can absolutely email him at nicholas.steppig@basf.com**.**

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How did you begin working in Weed Science?

Internships and on-campus research experiences that I had as an undergraduate were critical for developing my passion for weed science, and ultimately my decision to pursue a career in the field! My internships with DuPont Crop Protection and Dow AgroSciences first exposed me to the world of weed science from an applied point of view. I was immediately intrigued by small plot research, and have always found herbicides to be the most fascinating of crop protection products. My supervisors, Dr. Larry Hageman with DuPont (now FMC), and Dr. Joe Armstrong with Dow (now Corteva), were fantastic field scientists and mentors, and inspired my curiosity that led me to pursue graduate degrees, and eventually a career, in weed science. Thanks in part to funding from the WSSA, I also had the opportunity to work on an undergraduate research project with Dr. Pat Tranel at the University of Illinois during my senior year. The project fostered my ability to think scientifically and work independently, which served me well in graduate school.

Imparting wisdom

Don't be afraid to ask questions! I spent too much time as a graduate student thinking I needed to know the answers to everything on my own. Remember that your advisor and group/lab mates are great resources who are there to help you succeed.

When the time comes, there is no such thing as too much preparation for a job interview, especially if the potential job means a lot to you. In the first part of my interview, I was asked simply to introduce myself. I had polished up my brief "elevator pitch" ahead of time so that in just a few minutes the group interviewing me knew a bit of background about me, some high points of things that qualified me for the job, and why I was especially interested in the role I was interviewing for. Being prepared for this ahead of time helped to calm my nerves from the start of the interview and set the tone for subsequent questions. Also, my interview was conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams due to travel restrictions as a result of COVID-19. If you have a virtual interview, make sure to test the platform you will be using ahead of time to avoid potential issues with video, audio, etc.

When we are able to have our annual meetings in person again, make sure to try and meet as many new people as you can from outside your own university. The networks that you make can have a huge impact on your experience in graduate school, and eventually the job that you get afterwards. If we meet in person next year, come say hi to me, I'd love to share my experiences!