

A short history of the origins of the IGS

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ABSTRACT: Today, the International Geosynthetics Society (IGS) is well established, and the engineering community tends to take it for granted. As a result, the benefits from the IGS may not be recognized or may not be judged at their real value. Also, members of the engineering community may fail to recognize the specific nature of the IGS and, as a result, some may think the IGS is similar to any other engineering professional society. In reality, the IGS was tailored to meet the specific needs of the geosynthetics discipline as shown by this brief history. The needs of the geosynthetics discipline are specific because this discipline is original: it is closely associated to a material – the geosynthetics – which results in multiple interrelationships between the engineering branch and the manufacturing branch of the discipline. Also, without the IGS, the professional life of all interested in geosynthetics (whether they are IGS members or not) would not be as effectively organized as it is today as a result of the many benefits provided by the IGS.

1 INTRODUCTION

In 1993, on the tenth anniversary of the IGS, I was told: “You started the IGS 10 years ago, but today, even if you wanted to stop it, you could not.” In a nutshell, it was the best measure of the success of the IGS: we cannot stop it.

How could we stop the thousands who attend conferences and meetings sponsored by the IGS or its chapters? How could we stop the thousands who read *IGS News* and the two official journals of the IGS? How could we stop the many thousands who use geo-synthetics and benefit – directly or indirectly – from the IGS? Certainly, hard work by a few is necessary to keep the society running, but, clearly, the IGS is beyond the point of no return because it has reached the critical mass: there are volunteers to accomplish the essential tasks required by the management of the society, there are volunteers to participate in the committees emanating from the IGS, there are volunteers to organize regional and local activities under the auspices of the IGS, there are volunteers to organize international conferences, etc.

Clearly, the IGS plays an essential role in the geosynthetics discipline. And, since the geosynthetics discipline is an essential component of civil engineering, the IGS is now recognized as one of the main professional societies in civil engineering. However, the IGS is more than “another” professional

society. As shown herein, the IGS meets the specific needs of a very original engineering discipline, a discipline focused on a material – the geosynthetics – which results in multiple interrelationships such as: users-suppliers, design-testing, specifiers-manufacturers, geotechnical engineers-polymer scientists, etc.

Today, the IGS is so well established that many of its members take it for granted and do not properly appreciate the many benefits provided by the society. Therefore, the IGS officers and the organizers of the 8th International Conference on Geosynthetics believe that a brief history of the IGS may help members of the geosynthetics discipline (not only IGS members) understand how fortunate they are to have the IGS, a professional society that meets the needs of an original discipline and provides benefits that have become so natural that they are too easy to forget.

2 THE CONCEPT

The organization of the second international conference on geotextiles, held in 1982, prompted discussions on the formation of an international society. On 23 June 1980, in Chicago (USA), I was chairing a meeting of the organizing committee appointed a few weeks before at a meeting of the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) to organize “an”

international conference on geotextiles. An important item on the agenda was the selection of the name of the conference. We considered the name “Second International Conference on Geotextiles”, thereby recognizing the precedent set by the International Conference on the Use of Fabrics in Geotechnics held in Paris in 1977 and setting a trend for future conferences. However, one member of the committee objected that, since the conference held in Paris was not called the “first” conference, it was not appropriate to call our conference the “second”. To which I replied that a good husband would not call his wife “my first wife” while he is married to her. The name of the conference was adopted and the minutes of the meeting read:

“The official name will be Second International Conference on Geotextiles. This name implies that the conference held in Paris in 1977 is recognized as the first one and that a third conference could be organized in 1986 or 1987. Also implied is that an International Society on Geotextiles should be created.”

Clearly, the concept of an International Society on Geotextiles was closely associated with the organization of international conferences. Also, the above anecdotes and the anecdotes that follow show that the concept of the IGS emanated from people actively involved in this new discipline. As a result, the society was formed with a deep understanding of the needs of the new discipline. This explains in great part the remarkable success of the IGS. In contrast, if the IGS had been created as a sub-division of an existing professional society in the field of civil engineering, the specific needs of our discipline could have been ignored, and it is possible that this kind of IGS would not have survived.

3 A PRELIMINARY STEP

An essential first step in any international activity is to generate interest in as many countries as possible. The opportunity to meet representatives from European countries arose with the Swiss Symposium on Geotextiles held in March 1982 in Zurich (Switzerland), a very central location for Europe. On 30 January 1982, I called from the United States Professor Charles Schaerer, the organizer of this one-day symposium, and suggested that a meeting be held to discuss the “creation of an international society on geotextiles”, as phrased in the letter of confirmation sent the next day. Professor Schaerer, always enthusiastic, agreed to organize the meeting, and both of us invited key geotextile specialists from European countries. The meeting held in Zurich on 4 March 1982 was attended by 25 participants from 7 countries. I started the meeting by presenting what could be the

goals and the organization of an international society and, after discussion, all agreed that an international society on geotextiles should be formed. Professor Schaerer prepared the minutes of this historic meeting.

Having secured the support of key European professionals, I presented the concept to North American professionals at a meeting held in conjunction with a meeting of the ASTM in Toronto (Canada) on 25 June 1982. The participants of the Zurich and Toronto meetings were invited to attend a meeting to be held in Las Vegas (USA) in conjunction with the Second International Conference on Geotextiles.

Clearly, from the very beginning, the formation of the IGS was carefully prepared on the basis of international consensus. This gives the IGS an authority that is recognized worldwide.

4 THE DECISION

The meeting held on 4 August 1982 in Las Vegas was an impressive success with 150 participants from 34 countries, according to the minutes prepared by Professor Ara Arman. After I presented the concept of an international society on geotextiles, a couple of participants asked if there was really a need for such a society. Their questions turned out to be extremely useful, because they gave me an opportunity to reiterate some key points in favor of a society and call for a vote at an early stage of the meeting. This crucial moment in the infancy of the IGS is recorded as follows in the minutes:

“Dr. Giroud asked that the assembly vote on the desirability of such a society, and he asked for a show of hands. The majority of approximately 150 participants voted for the formation of such an organization. There were a few abstaining votes and no opposition.”

At that moment, everybody in this international assembly knew that an international society on geotextiles would be formed. The rest of the meeting consisted of long discussions on the formation of an Interim Committee and the tasks of the committee. In particular a quasi-unanimous vote (one against, no abstention) indicated that, in addition to preparing the by-laws of the society, the interim committee would select the venue of the Third International Conference (no discussion about the numbering!) and a vote was taken for the date of the Third Conference: 14 votes in favor of three years after the Second Conference, 19 votes in favor of five years, and the rest of the approximately 150 participants in favor of four years. This confirms the close link between the society to be formed and the organization of international conferences. Today, many tend to consider that the international conferences come

automatically every four years. In reality, it was crucial to work hard to generate an international consensus around the concept of international conferences every four years. Also, the fact that the authority of the IGS is recognized worldwide has facilitated on several occasions the delicate selection between several good country-candidates for the venue of an international conference.

From the above narration, it is clear that the decision to form the IGS was truly international. The fact that 34 countries were represented in the decision to form the society is absolutely remarkable for a young discipline.

5 THE OFFICIAL FORMATION

In 1982-1983, the Interim Committee worked diligently under the chairmanship of Professor Schaerer. In particular, an important task was the preparation of the by-laws of the society. Most of us take these by-laws for granted or think that they are standard by-laws applicable to any professional society. In reality, the by-laws were carefully tailored to the needs of our emerging discipline and are in great part responsible for the rapid success of the IGS. To those who tell me “there would be no IGS without you” I always reply “the IGS would not be what it is without Guy Massenaux”. Indeed, he wrote the visionary bylaws that closely associate corporate and individual members. It is clear that the geosynthetics discipline would not exist without geosynthetics and geosynthetics would not exist without the manufacturers. Guy Massenaux devised the mechanism that associates the manufacturers to the functioning of the IGS, with the weight that is relevant to their essential role. In fact, the corporate membership masterfully devised by Guy Massenaux has attracted to the IGS, not only manufacturers, but also civil engineering contractors and other large groups, which has been highly beneficial to the IGS and the geosynthetics discipline. Guy Massenaux should also be given credit for the excellent IGS logo.

On 10 November 1983, 14 of the members of the Interim Committee met in Paris (France) for the official founding of the International Geotextile Society – the IGS – which occurred at 16:08 according to the minutes of the meeting. The list of those present at the inaugural meeting may be found in *IGS News*, Vol. 5, No. 2, July 1989, page 2. A group of members had prepared nominations for officers. Professor Schaerer, who had played an active role in the original meeting in Zurich and who had chaired the Interim Committee was the logical choice for president to ensure continuity until the first General Assembly to be held in 1986 on the occasion of the Third International Conference. Guy Massenaux was the obvious choice as the secretary, and, to my great

surprise, my name was on the slate as past-president! The group explained that their intent was to recognize what I had done for the formation of the society. However touching the intention was, I did not agree. I thought my role in IGS should be more in the future than in the past and was very honored in 1986 to be the first president elected by a General Assembly held at an international conference. Other presidents have followed – Kerry Rowe, Colin Jones, Richard Bathurst, Daniele Cazzuffi, and soon Fumio Tatsuoka – and under their guidance (and with a variety of style that attests to the vitality of the IGS) the society has developed its activities and established its international reputation, while Pete Stevenson has ensured continuity, being the longest serving IGS officer, as treasurer then secretary for many years.

6 EXTENSION

Until 1983, even though geomembranes were already used in many projects, they had somehow stood aside from the excitement caused by the great variety of applications of geotextiles. As a result, the focus in 1982-1983 had been on the formation of an International Geotextile Society and the organization of International Conference on Geotextiles.

However, it quickly became apparent that geomembranes and other synthetic materials belong to the same discipline as geotextiles. In fact, in the wake of the success of the Second International Conference on Geotextiles, an International Conference on Geomembranes was being organized. This conference was to be held in 1984 in Denver (USA). As I was chairing the organizing committee of that conference, it had been easy to schedule a meeting where “a proposal from the existing International Geotextile Society will be made” regarding “the possible addition of geomembrane professional interests within the existing society or forming a new geomembrane society”, according to the conference program.

The meeting, which took place on 23 June 1984, was attended by 57. I indicated that the IGS Council had agreed to broaden the scope of the IGS to include geomembranes. It was decided to form a committee composed exclusively of geomembrane specialists from seven countries, co-chaired by Piero Sembenelli and Robert Wallace. The committee met the next day and accepted the offer from the IGS. The by-laws of the IGS were then amended to include not only geomembranes, but also all related products. In particular, it was agreed that, since geotextiles, geomembranes and related products belong to the same family of materials, they should be discussed at joint conferences. As a result, the scope of the IGS was extended to “geomembranes and related products” and the Third International Conference on Geotextiles,

held in Vienna (Austria) in 1986, included papers on geomembranes and related products.

The 1990 international conference was called International Conference on Geotextiles, Geomembranes and Related Products. Clearly, all geosynthetics were then members of the family and the time was right for a name change. In 1992, the IGS Council agreed to change the name of the society from International Geotextile Society to International Geosynthetics Society (thereby keeping the same acronym, IGS, an important consideration). Consequently the name of international conferences became International Conference on Geosynthetics. Also, the scope of the society was broadened to incorporate associated technologies.

It is important to note that the extension of the scope of the society was made with the same spirit as the formation of the IGS: it was not a decision imposed from the top; it was a decision made by representatives of the industry.

7 THE IGS AT WORK

In 23 years, the IGS has grown remarkably. Today, the IGS has more than 2000 members, including more than 100 corporate members and about 200 student members. During this period, the IGS has accomplished a lot, including: six international conferences in Vienna (Austria), The Hague (The Netherlands), Singapore (Singapore), Atlanta (USA), Nice (France) and Yokohama (Japan), in addition to the two international conferences that preceded the formation of the IGS, in Paris (France) and Las Vegas (USA); coordination of regional activities, including regional conferences, in Europe, Asia and the Americas; development of chapters and chapter activities in 25 countries or group of countries; an awards program with special emphasis on awards encouraging young members of the discipline including students; promotion of education, preparation of educational tools (CDs, Videos), and dissemination of technical documents (books, proceedings, bibliographies, etc.); preparation of a comprehensive terminology and list of symbols, an essential tool to ensure consistency in our discipline; and active cooperation with other professional societies to promote the use of geosynthetics and the technical and scientific work of members of the geosynthetics discipline.

The IGS has been very active in the dissemination of information, which is its primary goal. *IGS News*, the indispensable newsletter of the geosynthetics discipline has been published regularly since 1985, and the IGS has two official technical journals, *Geotextiles & Geomembranes* and *Geosynthetics International*. It is noteworthy that these two journals are ranked by specialized organizations among the very best journals in the field of civil engineering.

The reasons are simple: the geosynthetics discipline is the most exciting branch of civil engineering; and the editors and editorial boards of these two journals are driven by the same enthusiasm that drives the IGS officers and Council members. It should be noted that dealing with the official journals has required a significant amount of work from the IGS officers, in addition to the work done by the editors (whereas many people may think that technical journals are smoothly, and somehow automatically, run by their publishers). [More details on the history and activities of the IGS may be found on the IGS website, geosyntheticssociety.org]

8 CONCLUSION

The geosynthetics discipline is a remarkable discipline. Geosynthetics have been the most important innovation in the field of geotechnical engineering in the second half of the 20th century. With their multiple applications, geosynthetics have pervaded all branches of geotechnical engineering. As a result, today it is impossible to practice geotechnical engineering without geosynthetics. Such an outstanding discipline deserves an outstanding professional society. With the IGS, the geosynthetic discipline has the outstanding international society that it deserves.

However, there are some people who ask if it was really necessary to create “another” international society rather than joining an existing society. History shows that the right decision was made. No existing society would have treated, as equals, polymer scientists and geotechnical engineers, textile or plastic manufacturers and earthwork contractors, civil engineering design firms and material suppliers. No existing society would have provided an open forum for civil engineering and the synthetics industry as the IGS does. No existing society could command the authority that is conferred upon the IGS. The IGS enjoys this authority because every member — individual and corporate — knows that the IGS emanates from all of us, in a very open manner. Without the authority of the IGS, some dispute on the venue of an international conference or other matter would have already split our profession into geographic and/or interest groups.

Today, we tend to take the IGS for granted. May the anecdotes and the historical facts evoked above help our young members understand where we come from and realize that, without the IGS, and without the considerable amount of work involved in the formation and the development of the IGS, their profession would be different today, and would certainly not be as well organized as it is. Geosynthetics engineering is now a respected discipline that attracts outstanding professionals, in great part because the IGS has given this discipline a foundation and a prestige that are universally acknowledged.