Despite criticism nationally about change or lack of change, programs were changing in Washington. After much field testing with various researchers using different soil testing procedures, it became the collective wisdom of all concerned—administrators, researchers, and county agents alike—that the only way unified and standardized soil testing information could be provided on a statewide basis was to have a centralized laboratory to coordinate the program. Such a facility must serve the entire state. The concept did not come to fruition without debates, doubts, and delays. Strong leadership and support given to the idea by the newly appointed head of the Agronomy Department, Dr. B.R. Bertramson, finally led to the establishment of the soil testing program at Washington State University. The laboratory was located at Pullman in the Agronomy and Soils Department. It was to be a joint venture between the Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension.

The laboratory was established in 1950 under the direction of Dr. H.M. Reisenauer. Dr. C.B. Harston, Extension Soils Specialist, began to devote a major part of his time to field experiments to provide a broader data base for correlating response to fertilizer applications with soil tests.

The first tests involved pH, percent organic matter, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, and magnesium levels in acid soils both in western and eastern Washington. For the central Washington irrigated area, tests were pH, percent organic matter, phosphorus, potassium, and salinity level. A special test was offered to determine the gypsum requirement of soils of central Washington that were affected with high sodium levels. A special test was also available for the tree fruit area—a test for arsenic. Also available was a test for water to determine suitability for irrigation.

During the initial stages of the program, the interpretation and appropriate recommendation for the tests were made by Dr. Reisenauer. As the program expanded, Dr. Harston assumed the task of interpretation and recommendation.

Soon after its start, the program was challenged by a group of privately owned analytical laboratories who charged unfair competition from a state-supported facility.