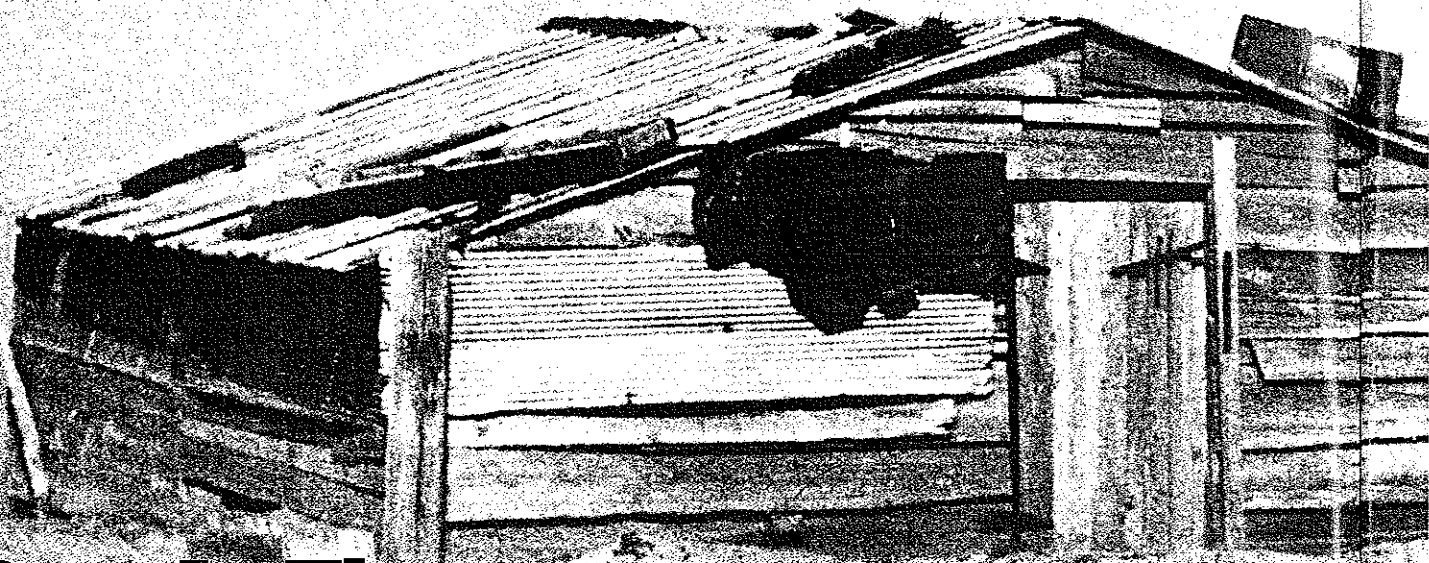


# YOUR LAND



## Dust In The WIND

A near-perfect storm of events resulted in the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. In response, the Soil Conservation Service was created and soil conservation became a national priority.

BY: KARL WOLFSHOHL

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This year marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what is now the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Originally established by Congress as the Soil Conservation Service in 1935 following the Dust Bowl's devastating damage to the nation's farmland, it launched a partnership between farmers and the federal government to protect the soil.

Today, this national effort extends to a host of services to preserve other natural resources and ensure clean water, clean air and productive, sustainable soils. Yet despite all the new programs and initiatives, "helping people help the land" remains NRCS's top priority.

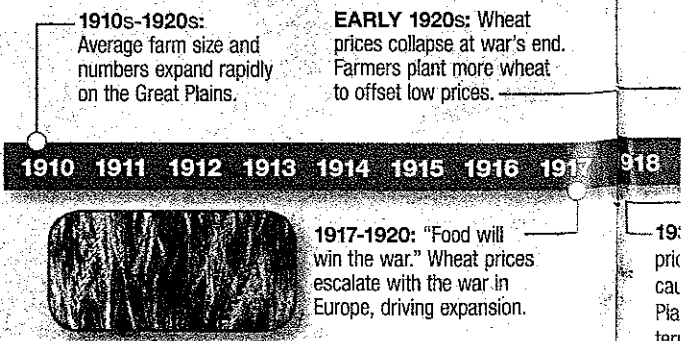
In the following pages, you'll see how actions borne from a soil conservation disaster have become a triumph for the American farmer—and this nation—to feed the world and protect our most valuable resource. Conservation is, indeed, one of America's greatest success stories.

**O**n April 14, 1935, a storm was brewing over the Dakotas, the likes of which young farm boys Millard Fowler, K.B. Williams and Don Wells had never seen.

Borne on the leading edge of a cold front, dust rolled toward their homes in Cimarron County, Okla. The dust traveled as a massive, dark, boiling wall, scattering wildlife, stampeding cattle and leaving near-total darkness in its wake.

"I was 11 years old when that storm came in," Wells remembers in awe. "Anything that anybody says about it, I've never heard it exaggerated."

### Conservation Milestones



SOURCES: DOUGLAS HELMS, NRCS; "THE DUST BOWL" BY R. DOUGLAS HURT

Arthur Coble and his two sons run for cover during a dust storm on their Cimarron County, Okla., farm in 1936.



"People thought maybe the world was coming to an end," Williams concurs. "Mom put us kids in the cellar, and after a while we peeked out and could see 3 or 4 feet, so we went back in the house. There was an electric lightbulb in the center of the house, and you could just see a pink glow from that bulb through the dust."

This day was dubbed Black Sunday, and Cimarron County was near ground zero of what would become the Dust Bowl of the 1930s on the

southern High Plains.

It was the culmination of a perfect storm that had been building in this region for more than 30 years.

**PLOWING THE PRAIRIE.** In the early 1900s, farms began to grow on the Plains right along with higher wheat prices. Following the mantra "food will win the war," farmers expanded during and immediately after World War I.

Most usually ignored conservation measures—including the use of the

more soil-friendly lister plow—in favor of the one-way plow, which cut faster through the sod and killed weeds more efficiently. Unfortunately, this destroyed organic matter and made the prairie soils more prone to wind erosion.

Drought and high winds in the 1930s did the rest, stripping soil by the thousands of tons from formerly productive prairie lands.

Meanwhile, farmers abandoned the ravaged area by the thousands, pushed out by low yields and the Depression.

By December 1934, the "Yearbook of Agriculture" maintained that about 35 million acres of cultivated land had essentially been destroyed for crop production, and that 100 million acres in crops had lost all or most of their topsoil. One year later, experts estimated 830 million tons of topsoil had blown off the southern Plains.

"The wind had blown the topsoil off most of the ground," Wells remembers. "It was a good place for hunting arrowheads, and that's about it."

Stockmen fed thistles and soap weeds to their cows until, as Fowler says, "there weren't enough weeds to feed the cattle."

Yet even the cloud of the Dirty Thirties had a silver lining. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Soil Conservation Act of 1935 establishing the Soil Conservation Service. ▶ ▶



1928: Hugh Bennett publishes "Soil Erosion: A National Menace."



1931-1937: Extreme drought on the Great Plains.

MARCH 4, 1933:

President Franklin D. Roosevelt is inaugurated. Soil and water conservation turns into a New Deal national priority.

APRIL 14, 1935: Black Sunday

1918 1919 1920 1921 1922 1923 1924 1925 1926 1927 1928 1929 1930 1931 1932 1933 1934 1935

1931: A bumper wheat crop drives down prices, helping the oncoming drought cause economic disaster for the Great Plains. Many farmers give up listing, terracing and strip-cropping to save costs.

1929: Congress creates first federal soil erosion experiment stations.



JANUARY 21, 1932: "Awe-inspiring" is used to describe a duster striking Amarillo, Texas.

APRIL 27, 1935: Congress passes the Soil Conservation Act, PL-46, creating the Soil Conservation Service. Bennett becomes its first chief.



# The Start Of SOMETHING BIG

The SCS/NRCS has helped farmers adopt practices that have saved millions of tons of soil. But its work extends beyond protecting the land. **BY KARL WOLFSHOHL**

**M**other Nature helped Hugh Bennett sway Congress to create the Soil Conservation Service with Public Law 46 in 1935. Bennett became the agency's first chief and America's father of soil conservation.

SCS, whose name was changed to Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in 1994, expanded and took on new partners over the decades to implement programs to benefit the soil, water and other natural resources.

With about 71% of all land in the lower 48 states privately owned, foremost among these partners is the American farmer.

"National conservation action must spring from people on the land and, to a large extent, be advanced by them as individuals, with the help of government," Bennett said.

Today, the nation benefits from a partnership based on technical

assistance and support from USDA and guided by farmer-led local conservation districts.

**A TRUE PARTNERSHIP.** NRCS chief Dave White explains: "You can point to different programs that have been successful along the way, but I think our greatest accomplishment is being trusted by the men and women who work the land. Our whole premise was set up to respectfully work with people at the local level."

Over the years, the agency has added water, air, plants and wildlife to the soil it was first charged with protecting. Since 1935, there have been many milestones in American conservation efforts. (See timeline.)

NRCS historian Douglas Helms believes a handful of those milestones related to SCS/NRCS stand above the rest in their reach and importance.

- ▶ **1935:** Public Law 46 creates the Soil Conservation Service.
- ▶ **1937:** The Standard State Soil

Conservation Districts Law establishes local districts to lead conservation planning and allows farmers to enter into contracts for help from SCS.

▶ **1954:** The Watershed Protection and Flood Control Act requires resource concerns be addressed on a watershed scale and raises issues with flooding.

▶ **1985:** The Food Security Act (farm bill) initiates the Conservation Reserve Program and also puts teeth into conservation by linking it to program benefits.

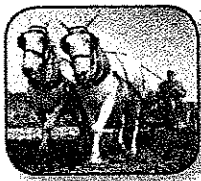
"Conservation tillage made the Food Security Act possible," Helms says. "Otherwise, to meet soil loss reductions, farmers would have had to do practices that were much more expensive, like building lots of terraces and going to more rotations that would have taken away their cash crops."

▶ **1990s:** A slew of changes, including the 1996 farm bill and its Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), grants easements for wetlands and farm preservation.

Decades of conservation measures have helped decrease soil loss substantially. For example, the 2007 National Resources Inventory found that soil erosion on cropland decreased 43% from 1982 to 2007, saving millions of tons of soil in the U.S.

While challenges still remain, NRCS's White says the larger issue is

**1939:** By now, farmers following SCS advice are using proper tillage tools and accepted practices such as terracing, strip-cropping, contour plowing and leaving crop residue on the soil surface during the windy season.



**1950s:** Drought and dust storms return to the Great Plains.

**1955:** No-till research is given a boost by Paraquat's newfound use as a herbicide.

**1985:** The Conservation Reserve Program and conservation compliance are parts of The Food Security Act.

1936

1940

1950

1960

1970

1980

**1940:** A return of the wet cycle ends major dust storms.

**1937:** The Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law guides states in establishing local conservation districts.

**1941-1950:** Another big plow-up. Farmers prosper, breaking more sod for wheat in Colorado and cotton in Texas and New Mexico.

**1954:** The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act expands watershed protection to all states.



**1973:** Kentuckians Harry Young and Shirley Phillips publish their book "No-Tillage Farming," the first of its kind. No-till and its variations gradually spread across America, helping make soil-conservation efforts feasible and affordable.

## A conservation crusader

Equal parts scientist and showman, Hugh Hammond Bennett grew up in the Southeast and crusaded for national soil and water conservation measures well before the Dust Bowl.

"Bennett was from Anson County, N.C., where erosion was evident from years of planting cotton," notes NRCS historian Douglas Helms.

"He began his career as a soil surveyor for the USDA in 1903 and was concerned about soil conservation throughout the United States."

Bennett conducted soil surveys and investigated declining crop yields, convincing himself that soil erosion was a problem for rural communities as well as farmers. He coauthored a USDA bulletin in 1928 calling soil erosion "a national menace."

Bennett helped establish the Soil

Erosion Service in the Department of the Interior and became its first director in 1933.

A Great Plains duster was predicted to blow into Washington, D.C., one day in spring 1935 as Bennett testified before a U.S. House of Representatives committee on the bill that would create the Soil Conservation Service.

Legend has it that he timed his presentation perfectly. As the storm arrived, Bennett led committee members to a window where they could watch as the dust cloud darkened the capital's sky.

The bill passed, the Soil Conservation Service was formed and Bennett became its first chief, a position he held until 1951.

In 2000, *The Progressive Farmer* named Hugh Bennett one of agriculture's most influential leaders of the 20th century.



**"If we take care of the land, it will take care of us."**

—HUGH BENNETT,  
FIRST SCS CHIEF

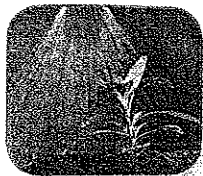
finding ways to conserve natural resources while growing food on fewer prime farmland acres for an ever-increasing population.

The United Nations predicts global food production will need to double by 2050. With help from its No. 1 partner, the American farmer, the NRCS is preparing to meet these challenges.

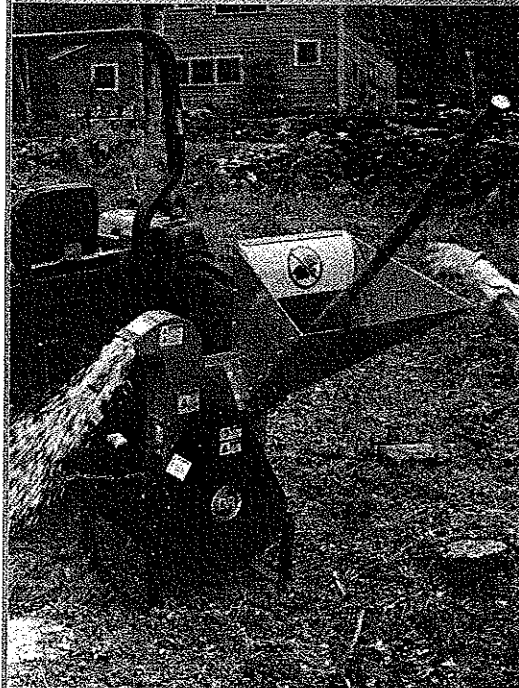
"We were created in the New Deal, but we're still around today because we're the real deal," says White. ➤

1990s: The Environmental Quality Incentives Program, EQIP, and related ones greatly expand protection and financial assistance for farmland, wetlands and wildlife.

1996-1998: Roundup Ready technology is introduced, accelerating conservation tillage.



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