

INTRODUCTION

Pre-Organization History

An explanation of the History: This is a statement of the land and water resources of South Dakota, beginning with early settlement and continuing to the time of the writing; what these resources were; how they were used and the consequences resulting from their use; the efforts and adjustments made by man to live with the natural resources of the area; the federal and state legislation providing for the use and management of the resources; the establishment, operation and management of Conservation Districts; the organization and the operation of the South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts, together with the operations of the Association.

Climatic Conditions: South Dakota is located in a region of wide variation in temperature, moisture and soils, all of which more or less determine the types of agriculture best suited for a particular area.

The soils vary from one part of the state to another. Those east of the Missouri River were formed from glacial deposits, while those lying west of the river are mostly non-glaciated, with possibly a few exceptions. Most of the soils east of the river are derived from the glacial deposits and influenced by weathering processes. In some areas immediately east of the Missouri, they show a cap of loess. To the east the soils are largely loams, silt loams, silty clay loams, and some sandy loams. West of the River they are largely clays and clay loams, and to the south some areas are silt loams and sandy loams with some fine sands.

There is also a wide variation in rainfall, with the high of 28.9 inches in Union County to 13.6 inches in Harding County. The variation from southeast to northwest is 28.9 inches to 13.6 inches. That from the northeast to the southwest is 22.3 inches to 15.7 inches. From the southeast to the southwest it is 28.9 inches to 15.7 inches and from the northeast corner of 22.3 inches to 13.6 inches at the northwest corner of the state. This wide variation in rainfall, together with the variation in the soils, largely determines the types of farming that are carried on over the state.

Roughly, there are three agricultural areas in the state. While there is no definite line of change between areas, there is a gradual shift. The Missouri River is the closest to a definite break—and perhaps from the middle of the state north it is a fairly sharp break. The eastern one-third of the state is the more intensive farming area with the production of grains and cultivated crops of corn and soy beans, alfalfa and rotation grasses, dairy production and livestock feeding. The middle part is the great wheat and grain producing section. It extends north and south on the east side of the Missouri River, then crosses the river at about Highway 16 and angles southwest into Bennett County. There is also a lot of ranching and cattle raising in the area. The remainder of the west is the great livestock producing area, with both large and small ranches; and quite a lot of wheat and other grains are grown along with livestock production.

Early Settlements:

The first people to live in what is now South Dakota were the Lakota/Dakota/Nakota Sioux Indians who more or less roamed the state, but were more concentrated along the rivers, particularly the Missouri from Yankton to Bon Homme County to Fort Pierre and Sully County. The first white people to come to the state were explorers; then fur traders, followed by missionaries and gold seekers; then finally by homesteaders.

The first permanent homesteaders came to Yankton in 1858 and then migrated north and west along the Missouri River. Settlers came to Sioux Falls in 1856 and Medary in Brookings County in 1857, but were driven out by the Sioux. By 1869 the settlers began to move back and remained permanently. The early settlers of the western part of the state came seeking gold in the Black Hills beginning in 1874.

Most of the real homesteaders came from the agricultural states immediately to the east and south and were seeking land where they could establish homes and make a livelihood from the land. They found resources that were very attractive to them, such as a deep dark grass, early, medium and late grasses, more or less mixed together. They found lakes and rivers and creeks as a source of water; and animals, birds and fish to help with the family food supply.

As the eastern part of the state became settled and the homesteaders pushed westward, they found these same resources, only not quite so plentiful. And so the type of agriculture needed to be adjusted to fit the climate. Then they found the western one-third of the state to be much more suitable for livestock production chiefly, along with some grain farming. The water supply was more limited and needed to be supplemented by shallow wells and deep wells and by the construction of dams, particularly in the central and western parts of the state.

The early settlers came largely from the states to the east and south, and were mostly sons and daughters of pioneers; pioneers, many of whose ancestry traces back to immigrants from western and northern European countries; ancestors who loved the land and came to a new world to find land for themselves and their families. They had a farming background. They were mostly farmers, but not all. Some were teachers, some were business people, some were office workers, and some were laborers. They all came to get land, and to farm the land and to establish homes for themselves and their families.

At the time of the early settlement, there was very little scientific information about soil and its management or moisture management available to people other than college and university professors of soils. And so until this time the people looked to the states to the east for farming information. That proved quite satisfactory for a generation or more—until the early 1930's when a prolonged period of low rainfall and high winds appeared. Soon the lack of moisture prevented the growth of sufficient cover to protect the fields from damage by wind and water erosion. The many years of cropping had reduced the organic matter supply in the soil, thus reducing the soil to a condition where it was susceptible to both wind and water erosion.

Disastrous erosion occurred over the entire state, with the most serious erosion on the more sandy textured soils. Grasslands and ranges also suffered, first from extended overgrazing and then from erosion due to insufficient grass cover, also resulting from overgrazing.

Economic disaster resulted from a prolonged lack of income. Many farmers lost the farms and moved from the land in search of employment. Business in towns and cities suffered. Local, county, state and federal officials became concerned and began to search for remedies.

As the erosion conditions progressed and became more acute, the farmers and ranchers decided to take their problems direct to Washington and present them to the Secretary of Agriculture and ask for immediate assistance. In March, 1935, representative farmers from every county in South Dakota made a trip to Washington and presented their problems to government officials. The officials informed these people of federal programs for agriculture that had been enacted in previous years. The people wanted these programs implemented.

Many years before some federal leaders began to think about the development programs leading toward the conservation the nation's natural resources. First they were interested in timber resources, then minerals, water, and finally soil.

Probably the first indication of widespread public interest in conservation came from a White House conference of governors called by Theodore Roosevelt in 1908 and was attended by scientists, specialists, industrialists, economists, politicians, and others. The first interest seemed to be in forestry and wildlife; then conservation of public lands received attention, and later water conservation on reclamation projects.

Nation-wide Activities Established

An appropriation in 1929 provided for conducting soil erosion investigations. Soil erosion experiment stations were set up under the Bureau of Soils.

In 1933, the Soil Erosion Service was established to conduct erosion control investigations, under the Department of Interior.

In 1935, the name of the Soil Erosion Service was changed to the Soil Conservation Service. The legislation which set up the Soil Erosion Service provided for establishing erosion control demonstration projects where erosion control practices were used as demonstrations; and also provided for CCC camps to supply the labor and machinery to conduct this demonstration work.

On January 18, 1935, H.J. Clemmer was appointed Regional Director for the Soil Conservation Service in South Dakota. He opened an office in Huron early in the spring of 1935. This served both as a Regional and Project Office during the period 1935-36.

Early in 1936 the Regional Office was moved to Rapid City where it remained until the spring of 1939 when it was moved to Lincoln, Nebraska.

Mr. A.D. Ellison, State Coordinator in 1936, was also assigned as Project Manager at Huron. Early in 1938 he moved to Rapid City as assistant to Mr. Clemmer. Mr. Ross D. Davies succeeded him as State Coordinator with his office in Brookings. Mr. Roy Graves became the Project Manager at Huron.

Demonstration Projects

The first erosion control demonstration project established in the state was known as Wolsey-Shue Creek. It comprised 190,000 acres in the Wolsey area and the area east and northeast of Huron in the Shue Creek Watershed. When establishing the project it was noted that 28 percent of the area had been severely eroded and about 50 percent subject to severe wind erosion. The primary objective was to provide assistance to farmers in the use of various methods and practices which would demonstrate the control of wind erosion.

To receive this assistance, farmers entered into cooperative agreements with the Soil Conservation Service. The agreement also listed the practices that were to be installed. Wind strip cropping, rough tillage, and field windbreaks were found to be the most effective practices to combat wind erosion. Pasture management practices including contour furrows and pitting were used for moisture conservation. Numerous dams were also built.

The Winner-Dixon project was started in October 1935 with headquarters at Winner. Portions of Tripp and Gregory counties made up the area of 49,280 acres. It also suffered severe wind

erosion damage in the 1930's, especially in 1934, 1935, and 1936. Consequently, many of the same practices and techniques used at Huron were applied here. Water erosion was an added problem on the sloping lands. To combat this, contouring and contour strip cropping with terracing was needed. Many of the project plans developed included these practices and demonstrated the importance of these practices in combating water erosion. The first Project Manager was L.M. Sloan who had worked for a few months in the Huron office.

The Demonstration Projects functioned as such until after the conservation districts were getting organized. They had served their purpose—to demonstrate how erosion, both wind and water, could be controlled through the use of various conservation practices.

Civilian Conservation Corps Camps

These camps became an important cog in the conservation “Wheel of Progress” in 1935. Their dual objective was to help conserve the soil and provide needed employment to the nation’s youth and veterans of World War I.

South Dakota had four camps assigned to the Soil Conservation Service. These were located at Alcester, Huron, Chamberlain, and Sturgis. There were side camps at Vermillion, Miller, and Presho. Mr. D.A. Williams served as the Superintendent of the camp at Presho in his early days with the Service.

CCC camp operations were joint endeavors between the United States Army and federal agencies responsible for conservation of the nation’s land, water, and plant resources. In the Department of Agriculture, the two agencies were the Forest Service and the Soil Conservation Service. In the Department of Interior, it was the National Park Service.

The United States Army was responsible for the general administration of enrollees in the camps. The Soil Conservation Service provided for and supervised jobs in which the enrollees were engaged in the field.

Alcester – SCS-3—2746th Company

The Camp was established in June 1935. A side camp was set up at Vermillion in the spring of 1937 on an 80 acre nursery project. Mr. John Sponsler was the first camp superintendent. Mr. E.C. Bjorklund, who was the camp superintendent at Huron, replaced him in August 1938.

The main project consisted of the application of conservation practices on the farm lands in Union, Lincoln, and Clay counties. The enrollees constructed dams, sod waterways, grade stabilization structures, and terraces. They planted trees and renovated the old woodland areas. The nursery at Vermillion grew trees for use in conservation work in South Dakota and adjacent states. The camp was phased out early in 1941.

Chamberlain – SCS-1—4726th Company

The camp was established in July 1935. Mr. Taylor S. Solem was the camp superintendent. The primary project was the construction of an earth dam on Crow Creek. Other activities involved conservation practices on farm and ranch lands in Brule, Buffalo, and Lyman counties. The camp was closed out in 1940.

Huron - SCS-4--2770th Company

This camp was established in Huron at the State Fair Grounds in the fall of 1935. Mr. Peter Baukol was the first camp superintendent. He was succeeded by Mr. E.C. Bjorklund in November 1936.

The primary jobs in 1935 through 1938 were the construction of the two rubble masonry dams on the James River. The first was the Third Street dam in Huron and the second the Spink County Dam located about 25 miles north of Huron.

A group of men from the Huron Camp were taken to Presho in the fall of 1935 to establish a side camp there. Its purpose was to complete the construction of a large earth dam for flood control as well as recreational development.

In May of 1936, a side camp was established at Miller for the purpose of constructing an earthen dam. This dam impounds a lake, Lake Dakotah, used for recreational activities and as a Boy Scout Camp.

After the completion of the James River dams, the enrollees were used for conservation activities on farms in the Huron area.

Ft. Meade – SCS-6--2765th Company

The camp was established in October 1936 at Ft. Meade. Mr. W.D. Griggs was the first camp superintendent. He was succeeded by Mr. S.J. Kortan early in 1938. Mr. Clifford D. Sanders followed Kortan in 1939. The activities for the enrollees included all types of conservation work on farm land, as well as in the private forested areas.

The phasing out of the demonstration projects and CCC Camps brought about some changes in the type of assistance the Soil Conservation Service provided to farmers and ranchers. The significant change at this particular time was the entry of the soil conservation district into the battle. This provided local leadership for the program.

About the same time that the CCC camps were operating, Dr. J.G. Hutton, Head of the Soils Department at South Dakota State College, was employed by the Soil Erosion Service to conduct meetings over the state to explain to the people just what the soil is and what it means to man. He told how the soil was formed by nature; how it contained the food nutrients needed by man; man in his search for food had exploited the soil to the extent that the organic material in the soil had been reduced by 40 percent; the soil structure had broken down to the point where it no longer could resist the erosive power of either the wind or the water, with the consequent erosion that was taking place. The soil nutrients were reduced in nearly the same proportions, thus reducing the productive capability of the land.

Man may not have purposely created these conditions, but nevertheless, these conditions were created. And if man were to continue to secure his livelihood from this land, he must direct his attention to a type of agriculture that would remedy these conditions. Dr. Hutton's work undoubtedly did help many South Dakota farmers to realize what was happening to their soils, and to become conscious of the fact that they could and should do something about it. The people were searching for a remedy, and when the soil conservation district program came along, they remembered what Dr. Hutton had told them and were ready to accept the conservation districts as a practical solution to some of their problems.