

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

75 Years Helping People Help the Land: A Brief History of NRCS

For over 75 years, the Natural Resources Conservation Service has been a pioneer in conservation, working with landowners, local and state governments, and other federal agencies to maintain healthy and productive working landscapes.

On April 27, 1935 Congress passed Public Law 74-46, in which it recognized that "the wastage of soil and moisture resources on farm, grazing, and forest lands . . . is a menace to the national welfare," and it directed the Secretary of Agriculture to establish the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) as a permanent agency in the USDA. In 1994, Congress changed SCS's name to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to better reflect the broadened scope of the agency's concerns.

The creation of the Soil Conservation Service represented the culmination of the efforts of Hugh Hammond Bennett, "father of Soil Conservation" and the first Chief of SCS, to awaken public concern for the problem of soil erosion. Bennett became aware of the threat posed by the erosion of soils early in his career as a surveyor for the USDA Bureau of Soils. He observed how soil erosion by water and wind reduced the ability of the land to sustain agricultural productivity and to support rural communities who depended on it for their livelihoods. He launched a public crusade of writing and speaking about the soil erosion crisis. His highly influential 1928 publication "Soil Erosion: A National Menace" influenced Congress to create the first federal soil erosion experiment stations in 1929.

With the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as President in 1932, conservation of soil and water resources became a national priority in the New Deal administration. The National Industrial Recovery Act (P.L. 73-67) passed in June 1933 included funds to fight soil erosion. With this money, the Soil Erosion Service (SES) was established in the Department of Interior with Hugh Bennett as Chief in September 1933. SES established demonstration projects in critically eroded areas across the country to show landowners the benefits of conservation.

Perhaps no event did more to emphasize the severity of the erosion crisis in the popular imagination than the Dust Bowl. Beginning in 1932, persistent drought conditions on the Great Plains caused widespread crop failures and exposed the region's soil to blowing wind. A large dust storm on May 11, 1934 swept fine soil particles over Washington, D.C. and three hundred miles out into the Atlantic Ocean. More intense and frequent storms swept the Plains in 1935. On March 6 and again on March 21, dust clouds passed over Washington and darkened the sky just as Congress commenced hearings on a proposed soil conservation law. Bennett seized the opportunity to explain the cause of the storms and to offer a solution. He penned editorials and testified to Congress urging for the creation of a permanent soil conservation agency. The result was the Soil Conservation Act (PL 74-46), which President Roosevelt signed on April 27, 1935, creating the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in the USDA.

After 1935, SCS expanded its soil conservation program nationwide with a several-fold increase in the number of demonstration projects. Labor provided by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Civil Works Administration (CWA), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) supported this work. SCS's technical experts worked to advance scientific understanding of erosion processes and to develop effective conservation practices. SCS's network of regional nurseries selected and increased the seeds and plants necessary for conservation work.

In 1936, the agency assumed responsibility for performing surveys and devising flood control plans for selected watersheds under the authority of the Flood Control Act of 1936 (P.L. 74-738). In 1938, in a major reorganization of USDA's land management program, the Secretary of Agriculture made SCS responsible for administering the Department's drainage and irrigation assistance programs, the snow survey and water supply forecasting program, as well as the Water Facilities, Land Utilization, and Farm Forestry programs. The addition of these responsibilities made SCS the USDA's lead private lands conservation agency.

As early as 1935 USDA managers began to search for ways to extend conservation assistance to more farmers. They believed the solution was to establish democratically organized soil conservation districts to lead the conservation planning effort at the local level. To create a framework for cooperation, USDA drafted the Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law, which President Roosevelt sent to the governors of all the states in 1937. The first soil conservation district was organized in the Brown Creek watershed of North Carolina on August 4, 1937. Today, over three thousand conservation districts exist across the country.

The decade after World War II was a time of growth for SCS. Congress increased appropriations for soil conservation programs. The Secretary made SCS the lead agency responsible for technical oversight of the "permanent" type conservation measures installed with cost-share funds under the Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP). During this time the number of soil conservation districts continued to increase, as did the number of cooperators working with SCS to develop conservation plans for their farms.

Hugh Bennett stepped-down as Chief in 1951 and retired from federal service in 1952. The same year Secretary of Agriculture Charles Brannan unified USDA soils works when he merged the Soil Survey into SCS. Brannan also transferred most of SCS's research activities to the Agricultural Research Service and gave the Forest Service responsibility for administering SCS's Land Utilization Projects. In 1953, as part of a major reorganization of the USDA, SCS's regional offices were eliminated and the technical role of state offices was enhanced. At this time, SCS's nurseries relinquished their plant production role, but continued to select plants for conservation uses at Plant Materials Centers

Perhaps the most important development in the Post-War era came with passage of the Watershed Protection and Flood Control Act (P.L. 84-566) in 1954. Watershed planning has been an important part of the agency's mission since the 1930s. Hugh Bennett recognized that successful soil and water conservation required addressing resource concerns at the watershed scale. SCS organized its early demonstration projects on a watershed basis. With passage of the Flood Control Act of 1936, SCS began watershed investigations to determine the most effective methods to control erosion and prevent floods. The Flood Control Act of 1944 (PL 78-534) authorized SCS to begin work on its first eleven watershed projects. The Agricultural Appropriations Act of 1953 (P.L. 83-156) authorized an additional 63 projects. With the support of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Congress gave SCS permanent watershed planning authority with passage of the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (P.L. 84-566). Since 1944, SCS, now NRCS, constructed nearly 11,000 dams on some 2,000 watershed projects that continue to provide flood control, water supplies, recreation, and wildlife habitat benefits.

With arrival of another prolonged drought in the 1950s Congress passed the Great Plains Conservation Program which focused financial assistance for conservation in the Plains states. SCS provided financial and technical assistance to meet multiple objectives of conservation and economic stability. During this period, SCS also began to provide technical assistance for the

Soil Bank Program which paid rental payments for retired cropland and provided financial incentives to farmers for planting protective cover crops.

In the 1960s, under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, SCS's role expanded to address new concerns in the countryside in the cities. The agency began to emphasize rural development and recreation as conservation planning objectives. Creation of the Resource Conservation and Development program (RC&D) in 1962 allowed SCS to work with landowners in areas larger than small watersheds or conservation districts to develop long term economic development plans for the entire project area. SCS also began to focus on providing recreational benefits with its projects. SCS also began to become more involved in suburbanizing areas where farmland was being developed as commercial and residential areas. These initiatives were part of a broader effort by the USDA to extend its services to all of American not just the parts that live in rural areas or engage in production agriculture.

The 1960s and 1970s was a time of broad popular concern about the health of the environment. Expressed most prominently in the first Earth Day demonstration in 1970, these concerns led to the creation of a national framework of environmental policies during that changed the way SCS put conservation on the ground. The National Environmental Policy Act (P.L. 91-190), signed into law in 1970 by President Richard Nixon, required federal agencies to evaluate and report on the environmental impacts of their activities. Water quality and non-point source pollution became important areas of concern with passage the Federal Water Pollution Control Amendments (P.L. 92-500) in 1972 and the Clean Water Act (P.L. 95-217) in 1977. The protection of wetlands emerged as critical issue with SCS participation in the Water Bank program, which provided incentives to landowners to protect wetland habitat.

During the 1970s, SCS also gained greater authority to monitor and assess the nation's natural resource base. Congress authorized the National Resources Inventory (NRI) in the Rural Development Act of 1972 (P.L. 92-419) to better understand the implications of land use changes for soil erosion. The Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977 (P.L. 95-192) extended this authority and required USDA to regularly report to Congress on the condition of the soil and water resources on non-federal lands as part of a process for developing more effective conservation policies and laws.

The farm crisis of the 1980s created an opening for the implementation of innovative conservation policies developed as part of the Resource Conservation Act (RCA) process. The Food Security Act of 1985 (P.L. 99-198), with its Sodbuster, Swampbuster, and Highly Erodible Lands provisions, made conservation a prerequisite for participation in USDA programs. It also established the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to provide rental payments to farmers for putting cropland into grass or trees. Another important development during this period was the widespread adoption of conservation tillage practices, which has led to a significant reduction in soil erosion. SCS working with its partners played a significant role working to administer these programs and develop the necessary tools and technology to make these conservation innovations possible.

In a number of areas the NRCS has participated in what might be termed "restoration" projects to reverse previous land, channel and wetland alterations. In 1994 NRCS assumed management of the Wetland Reserve Program which had been authorized in the 1990 farm bill. Funds provided for restoration as well as long-term or permanent easements. SCS geologists and landscape architects coordinated a Federal effort to produce a "Stream Corridor Restoration" manual. The manual placed emphasis on use of vegetation rather than structural works for stream corridor restoration. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), authorized in

the 1985 farm bill, provided for long-term (10-year) rentals of cropland and establishment of vegetation on the reserve acres. In requiring vegetative cover, the SCS placed great emphasis on native species of grass. The nurseries and plant materials centers, which had been selecting plants for conservation uses since the beginning of the agency, now put an emphasis on selecting native seeds and plants for use in prairie and wetland restoration. They had also worked with the National Park Service to select and increase native seed and plants for the National Parks.

In 1994, Congress initiated a major reorganization of the USDA and renamed SCS the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to better reflect the broad scope of the agency's mission. These changes marked the beginning of two major trends that have defined the Service's role in conservation since. The first is NRCS's growing responsibility for administering financial assistance for conservation programs. The other increases many times over in the amount of financial assistance available for conservation. The result over the last two decades has been a proliferation of innovation programs that give conservationists and landowners the necessary means to protect our nation's natural resources.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service continues to fulfill the conservation legacy established in 1935 by Hugh Hammond Bennett even as it adapts to changing concerns and takes on new responsibilities to address present and future challenges. Through 75 years of experience, SCS and, now NRCS, has developed numerous science-based tools and standards in agronomy, forestry, engineering, economics, wildlife biology and other disciplines that local NRCS field office conservationists use in helping landowners plan and install conservation practices. NRCS professionals are guided by a conservation philosophy instilled in the Service from experience. This is to assess the resources on the land. Evaluate the conservation problems and opportunities. Look to different sciences and disciplines for solutions. Integrate all into a conservation plan for the whole property. Through implementing conservation on individual projects, contribute to the overall quality of life in the watershed or region. And, always work closely with land users so that the conservation plan reconciles with their objectives. These principles have served well as a foundation for addressing conservation challenges now for seventy-five years and will continue to do so in the future.