

Mention Dust Bowl, and many people my age might think you're talking about a new college football championship. Who doesn't enjoy a good "bowl game" during the Christmas holidays? But my great-grandparents generation know that the Dust Bowl was not a game - it was a real life event that tested peoples' limits and served as a prime example that pushing soil past its breaking point can create a national disaster.

Could the Dirty Thirties happen again? No one can control the weather – and drought is still a reality more often than not in some parts of the United States. Thankfully, as we look to the past, we can learn why conservation saved us from another Dust Bowl.

Overcoming the Dust Bowl though was like a bit of a championship game for America. If we ever wanted to produce our own crops and livestock there would need to be compromises and a coach to lead America to victory. That coach of this bowl game of conservation would be soil scientist, Hugh Hammond Bennett. As a soil surveyor he witnessed the sharp decline our environment was facing with soil erosion and recognized something had to be done. By traveling across the United States in the 1930's, he rallied farmers and ranchers who had witnessed the heart-wrenching images such as the Black Blizzards that occurred at 3 P.M. on a summer afternoon, the soiled piled up like 6 foot snow drifts, and livestock with just skin and bones trying to garner enough energy just to stand. He created the perfect team for implementing the plays to win the biggest game our soil has ever withstood - the Dust Bowl.

The first play Coach Hugh Hammond Bennett encouraged his team of farmers and ranchers was planting shelterbelts. Grove after grove of trees that would act as windbreaks and had roots that would encompass for miles to anchor in soil. My great-grandpa was one of these early conservation-minded farmers in Edmunds County. In the 1950's with the help of his local conservation district, he planted acres and acres of trees in the form of shelterbelts. My grandpa has continued that legacy on that same ranch by planting trees for wildlife and livestock shelter each spring.

With the football now in the hands of the farmers and ranchers Coach Hugh Hammond Bennett developed the second play that would prove whether or not his team was really committed to winning the Dust Bowl. The game plan had to change from moldboard plowing to reduced tillage such as no-till; increasing crop rotations and planting cover crops. This was a game changing play, now the soil was being held on the landscape.

In the game there were several touchdowns, with the introduction of CRP which took the most highly erosive land out of crop production in exchange for native grasses and legumes which provided a home to deer, pheasants, birds, and pollinators such as bees. By land managers implementing rotational

grazing this provided opportunities for the grass to recover as it allows for rest periods which can be especially important during a drought. This was a touchdown for farm families to continue their livelihood, to provide habitat for wildlife, and important for conservation as a way to build soil and improve water and air quality.

As the team reached the end zone with the ball in hand, there was one more very important play that would secure the win of the great Dust Bowl. That play was establishing national associations such as the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and state partnerships through the South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts, and the South Dakota Department of Ag that would go out and help these people join the conservation movement.

This year Congress passed the 2014 Farm Bill, which will continue the nation's conservation investment and streamline conservation efforts. This Farm Bill continues popular programs with farmers and ranchers such as the Conservation Stewardship Program which promotes conservation practices to build soil health by planting cover crops such as radishes and turnips, and through EQIP by planting legumes and forbs for bees. The United States is one of the most productive agricultural nations in the world, and as our world population and food production demands rise, keeping our soil healthy and productive is of paramount importance.

In the eighty years since the Dirty Thirties, the implementation of these conservation practices across the country have saved us from experiencing another Dust Bowl. We can't always predict when another drought will occur, like it did in 2012 when the 5<sup>th</sup> worst drought in history struck the Midwest. Times were challenging, but soil erosion and black blizzards were prevented. As famous Norte Dame Football Coach Lou Holtz once said, "Life is ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent how you respond." American farmers and ranchers have come to learn that drought is a normal occurrence and conservation is a key play in saving our resources.