

Why Conservation Saved Us From Another Dust Bowl

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The Dust Bowl, also known as the “Dirty Thirties”, was the worst man-made ecological disaster in American history. It was eight years of severe drought and black blizzards across the plains. In 1939, rain finally came and ended the drought. Farmers started taking many steps to conserve the soil. Conservation is a huge reason as to why there has not been another Dust Bowl.

The Dust Bowl made a huge impact on many people in the plains, especially in the south. One dust bowl survivor said, "The impact is like a shovelful of fine sand flung against the face." Simple tasks, such as breathing, eating, and walking, became very hard. Children had to wear dust masks to and from school. Women hung wet sheets to prevent more dust from coming in, and they set glasses and bowls upside down, so they would stay clean in the cabinets. Farmers could not help their crops from being blown away.

The dust storms covered about 75% of the country, affecting 27 states. The driest states were Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. The storms started there, then spread to New Mexico, Nebraska, Wyoming, South Dakota, and North Dakota. Eventually, they covered over half of the country. Some farmers began to migrate northwest, but many decided to tough it out.

These horrible eight years started in 1931, with a drought and a few dust storms. In 1932, fourteen dust storms were reported, and the next year thirty eight were reported. This is when people began taking action to help farmers. In 1934, the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) was established to administer conservation programs. Soil Conservation Districts were started in 1936 to provide for local input. In 1937, the Roosevelt Shelterbelt Project was started, which planted trees to help reduce the wind. Within one year, the soil erosion was reduced by 65%. Finally, the rain came in 1939, and the dreadful Dust Bowl was over.

Soil is probably the most important natural resource we have. Most life depends on the soil. Plants need healthy soils in order to grow. Animals get nutrients from the plants that grow in the soil. Almost everything we use on a daily basis can be traced back to the soil. From the food that we eat to the electronics that we use, without healthy soil we would be helpless. Soil takes many years to create, but can be destroyed in almost no time at all.

Conservation is a way to help protect and save our soil from erosion and other damage, so it will be healthy for many generations to come. There are many different farming techniques to conserve the soil. Strip cropping is putting crops in narrow strips, alternating what is planted in each strip, so there is less erosion. Crop rotation is when a different crop is planted each year to prevent diseases and insects and improve production. Terracing is on the side of a hill slope. This almost looks like stairs going up the hill, which prevents water from running off the hill. Contour farming is a technique where the land is farmed along the side of a hill, like terracing, but without the steps. Irrigation is a way to water the crops, without rain. Conservation tillage and no-till farming has had a huge impact on reducing soil erosion. Some of these farming techniques have come from different conservation programs.

There are many programs to help promote different conservation practices. The Natural Resource Conservation Service or the NRCS, formerly the Soil Conservation Service, is an agency that administers many conservation programs. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) pays farmers to plant permanent cover, instead of farming the land for a certain number of years. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a cost share program to help farmers pay for the different conservation practices. The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) pays farmers to use conservation management systems. Conservation Compliance, in the farm bill,

requires farmers with highly erodible land to reduce erosion on their fields in order to be eligible for farm programs.

In many ways, conservation can save us from another tragic event like the Dust Bowl. Bare soil is as open to damage as a turtle without its shell. It can take one thousand years to form one inch of soil, so we need to do all we can to save it. The Dust Bowl was a horrible event in the United States. Keeping these techniques, practices, and programs will help prevent it from happening again. There is no guarantee that there won't be another Dust Bowl, but the chance is less likely with conservation helping. As Franklin D. Roosevelt once said "A nation that destroys its soil, destroys itself".