

Directions for The Nature Conservancy article "When the Dust Settled":

1. Read the article.
2. State the main idea of the article.
3. List at least 3 supporting ideas.
4. Write a summary of the article.
5. Explain why soil is such an important resource. How can we conserve this precious resource?

For homework, watch the video interview with Ken Burns about his new documentary "The Dust Bowl". The link is provided in the body of the article. An electronic copy of this article is posted at Mrs. Duddles' web page with a link to the video.



A dust storm envelops houses in Stratford, Texas, 1935. These massive storms, called "black blizzards" or "black rollers" could reduce visibility to just a few feet.

When the Dust Settled

As a decade of rains on the Great Plains ended, a long drought began. Then the land started blowing away. The year was 1931—the beginning of the Dust Bowl.

For the next nine years, massive clouds of dust and dry soil swept across the nation, from Texas to Washington, DC, blackening skies, ruining farmland and leaving millions homeless. It was the worst environmental disaster in US history, **resulting from years of unsustainable agriculture** that eroded lands and destroyed native grasslands that held soils in place. It was also a wakeup call, leading lawmakers and environmental pioneers to take action that would help save the nation's agriculture industry and usher in a new era of land management and conservation.

[Watch a video interview with filmmaker Ken Burns, about his new documentary *The Dust Bowl*, and the importance of conservation.](#)

“The conservation measures and practices put in place as a result of the Dust Bowl have helped prevent similar catastrophic events,” said Tom Christensen, Regional Conservationist for the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Many of these initiatives put in place following the Dust Bowl continue today as part of the U.S. Farm Bill, which provides the **single largest source of federal funding for conservation**. Congress is now debating the bill's reauthorization, and funding for it could be decided this year.

Experts agree that the Farm Bill's conservation programs have helped prevent another Dust Bowl from sweeping the nation.

“A lot of people in agriculture here recognize that the programs implemented as a result of the Dust Bowl are having a really important effect on holding the soil in place,” said Mike Fuhr, Oklahoma state director for The Nature Conservancy.

The Dirty Thirties

“The Dust Bowl was the worst, sustained environmental crisis in U.S. history,” said Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, director of Iowa State University's Agriculture History and Rural Studies Program.

Lasting throughout the 1930s, the Dust Bowl was caused by a horrendous decade-long drought, high temperatures, soil already prone to blowing, and a vast increase in soil under cultivation.

“This region had been plowed up during the years between 1914 and 1920 to meet demand for wheat generated by World War I,” said Christensen. “These were wet years when dryland farming on the western Plains was feasible, but generally much of this land should never have been farmed because without the native perennial grass cover, it is vulnerable to blowing in dry years.”

And when those dry years returned, topsoil in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado and Kansas blew away. But the Dust Bowl's reach extended far beyond the farm. In May 1934, massive dust storms caked cities as far as New York, Atlanta and Washington. In Chicago, a two-day storm dumped 12 million pounds of soil on the city.

By the time it was over in 1940, **2.5 million people had left the Plains.**

[View a slideshow>>](#)

Government Response

But the decade of drought, dust and despair brought with it changes to the idea of **soil conservation and land management**.

In June 1933, Congress created a new federal agency, the Soil Erosion Service, to administer an erosion control program. Two years later, the agency began a campaign that provided financial incentives for farmers to take lands unsuited for agriculture out of crop production and turn them into permanent pastures or forests. New practices were also implemented, from engineering measures like terraces and drainage outlets, to farming methods like contour plowing and crop rotation.

The measures were successful, and by 1938, blowing soil was reduced by 65 percent.

Same Goals, New Challenges

By 1994, the Soil Conservation Service was called the Natural Resources Conservation Service and its conservation mission was expanded to include water and air quality, wildlife habitat, and energy.

Many of the programs under the [Farm Bill](#), like the Grassland Reserve Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program, have roots in those bleak, dusty days.

“These programs break down into two categories. There are those that retire farmland for habitat purposes, and then there’s the working lands programs, or stewardship programs, that incentivize conservation on working farmland,” said Sean McMahon, North America Agriculture Program Director for The Nature Conservancy.

“We use the term working lands, because we believe you must have good strong production that makes economic sense,” NRCS’ Christensen said. “But at the same time you have to sustain that natural resource and minimize impacts to the environment.”

According to Christensen, a severe drought on the Plains in the 1950s—worse than the drought of the 1930s—failed to produce dust storms of the same magnitude. And while severe droughts returned to Oklahoma from 2009 until 2011, the dust did not.

“These programs are absolutely critical to providing the nation’s food, feed, fiber and fuel in an increasingly sustainable manner,” noted McMahon.

But challenges remain. In the Mississippi River Basin, soil and fertilizer run-off pollutes the river and its tributaries. These nutrients also threaten the Gulf of Mexico’s fishing industry and ecosystem, creating a [Dead Zone](#) in the gulf.

“The U.S. Farm Bill and its conservation programs continue the work started during the Dust Bowl to help us tackle these new challenges before they become catastrophic,” McMahon said.

To learn more about the conservation programs in the U.S. Farm Bill, visit nature.org/farmbill.

Source:

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