

Natural Resources Conservation Service celebrates its 75th Anniversary – April 27th

By: Corine Burgess

Some folks may believe that there are similarities between what is happening today economically with past days when darkness and feelings of hopelessness were common. The Great Depression was a worldwide economic plunge that lasted from 1929 until the early 1940's. These dark and difficult times affected rich and poor, businessmen and farmers, and virtually everyone in every nation.

It all started with the stock market crash of October 29, 1929. The devastation of Black Tuesday was felt all over the world. In the United States, farming and rural areas suffered as crop prices fell by approximately 60 percent. By 1932, approximately one-fourth of America's men between the ages of 15 and 24 were out of work. Even the few that did have jobs were only part time. The days were dark in more ways than one.

From about 1930 through 1936 a severe drought combined with years of farming without good management practices such as crop rotation, cover crops and fallow fields, caused the Dust Bowl. By continuous deep plowing, the natural grasses had died and as a result no moisture was retained in the soil. Coupled with high winds, the dried soil from the ground blew over hundreds of miles of country, causing major ecological and agricultural damage.

Imagine the times; not only were people down and out with no jobs or source of income, but the dust literally blackened the sky. It seemed there was little or no brightness to be found. People were forced to leave their lifelong homes and become vagabonds, picking fruit and doing whatever work was available. Even those who were able to keep their land had challenges since the land had become a barren wasteland.

But through these dark clouds came a ray of hope in the form of Hugh Hammond Bennett. For years Bennett had been trying to convince the nation to take the problem of soil erosion seriously. Up until the Dust Bowl, he had been mostly ignored. But when the officials from Washington were feeling and seeing the blackened grit in their own neighborhood and on their desks, they decided to listen to what he had to say.

In the background, President Franklin Roosevelt was working to put men to work and help repair the natural resources in the form of the Civilian Conservation Corps. (CCC) As fortune would have it, the combination of these formerly downtrodden men and Hugh Bennett would change the fate of the country. Bennett knew that the CCC would have a good chance of convincing the farmers to try new conservation practices on their land. Thus began the Soil Erosion Service (SES), who was allotted 22 camps to assist landowners with their lands.

Over the next few years, 35 more SES camps were established to perform drought relief work on private lands. With the success of the Service, support for a national soil conservation program began to blossom. On April 27, 1935, the Soil Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture was born. Congress provided funds and the new agency expanded its operations all around the country.

Seventy five years later, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), formerly the SES, is going strong. Approximately 75% of the land in the United States is privately owned, making good management of land by the private landowners critical to the health of our nation.

NRCS has become a leader for conservation of natural resources in this country. Through conservation planning, technical advice, design, and financial assistance, NRCS works with landowners to benefit the soil, water, air, plants, and animals that result in productive lands and healthy ecosystems. NRCS has experts that understand, at a local level, the resource concerns that many face. We are fortunate to have this agency to provide assistance to landowners so that we won't be experiencing another "Dust Bowl."

Perhaps much of the success of the NRCS is due to their wonderful Earth Team Volunteers. In 2009, more than 30,000 Earth Team Volunteers donated more than 800,000 hours of their time to conservation practices. The total value of volunteer hours was over \$15 million. NRCS celebrates the 25th anniversary of Earth Team during National Volunteer Week from April 19th – 25th.

We may face many challenges in today's times, but if not for the dedication and diligence of people such as Franklin Roosevelt, Hugh Hammond Bennett, and countless volunteers, one wonders what this country would be like. Perhaps the economic state of our great nation is troubling, but we are fortunate to have environmental agencies such as NRCS and their partners such as the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District to help protect us from a repeat of a huge preventable environmental disaster.

In the words of Hugh Hammond Bennett, "From every conceivable angle—economic, social, cultural, public health, national defense—conservation of natural resources is an objective on which all should agree."