

The Dust Bowl

Agricultural Nightmares

Learning Objectives

Identify the causes of the Dust Bowl

Define the term "Okie"

Explain how the Dust Bowl was resolved

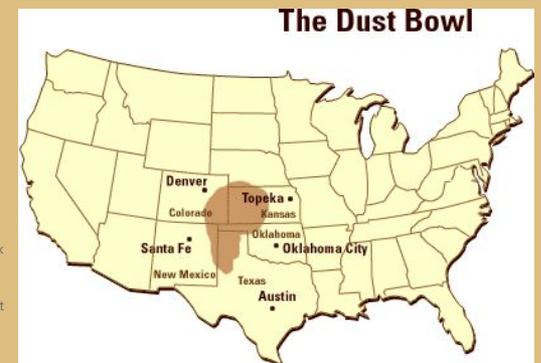


What caused it?

In a nutshell...

"The Dust Bowl, also known as the Dirty Thirties, was a period of severe dust storms that greatly damaged the ecology and agriculture of the U.S. and Canadian prairies during the 1930s; severe drought and a failure to apply dryland farming methods to prevent wind erosion caused the phenomenon.

For eight years dust blew on the southern plains. It came in a yellowish-brown haze from the South and in rolling walls of black from the North. The simplest acts of life — breathing, eating a meal, taking a walk — were no longer simple. Children wore dust masks to and from school, women hung wet sheets over windows in a futile attempt to stop the dirt, farmers watched helplessly as their crops blew away."



Source:

<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/depression/dustbowl.htm>

“Okie” Migrations

Less Work, More Problems

“As the “double whammy” of drought and depression deepened on the Great Plains, more and more farmers gave up or were forced off of their land. In addition, the relentless march of new tractors meant that the farmers who were able to scrape together enough money to buy a tractor could buy out their neighbors. Fewer farmers could farm more land. But where would those who left go?

Some went to cities. But many decided to head west. In fact, during the 30s hundreds of thousands left the plains for the West Coast. So many migrated from Oklahoma that they were dubbed “Okies” in the popular press. For years, California, Oregon and Washington had been growing. Many who were pushed off of the plains were pulled west because they had relatives who had moved to the coastal areas. And the boosters of California had advertised that the state offered a perfect climate and an abundance of work in the agricultural industry.”

Source: http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/water_06.html

Timeline

Timeline of Events

Source: <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/depression/dustbowl.htm>

1931- Severe drought hits the midwestern and southern plains. As the crops die, the “black blizzards” begin. Dust from the over-plowed and over-grazed land begins to blow.

1932- The number of dust storms is increasing. Fourteen are reported this year; next year there will be 38.

1933-March: When Franklin Roosevelt takes office, the country is in desperate straits. He took quick steps to declare a four-day bank holiday, during which time Congress came up with the Emergency Banking Act of 1933, which stabilized the banking industry and restored people’s faith in the banking system by putting the federal government behind it.

1933- May: The Emergency Farm Mortgage Act allots \$200 million for refinancing mortgages to help farmers facing foreclosure. The Farm Credit Act of 1933 established a local bank and set up local credit associations.

1933- September: Over 6 million young pigs are slaughtered to stabilize prices. With most of the meat going to waste, public outcry led to the creation, in October, of the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation. The FSRC diverted agricultural commodities to relief organizations. Apples, beans, canned beef, flour and pork products were distributed through local relief channels. Cotton goods were eventually included to clothe the needy as well.

Timeline Continued (a)

1933- October: In California's San Joaquin Valley, where many farmers fleeing the plains have gone, seeking migrant farm work, the largest agricultural strike in America's history begins. More than 18,000 cotton workers with the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU) went on strike for 24 days. During the strike, two men and one woman were killed and hundreds injured. In the settlement, the union was recognized by growers, and workers were given a 25 percent raise.

1934- May: Great dust storms spread from the Dust Bowl area. The drought is the worst ever in U.S. history, covering more than 75 percent of the country and affecting 27 states severely.
June: The Frazier-Lemke Farm Bankruptcy Act is approved. This act restricted the ability of banks to dispossess farmers in times of distress. Originally effective until 1938, the act was renewed four times until 1947, when it expired. Roosevelt signs the Taylor Grazing Act, which allows him to take up to 140 million acres of federally-owned land out of the public domain and establish grazing districts that will be carefully monitored. One of many New Deal efforts to reverse the damage done to the land by overuse, the program was able to arrest the deterioration, but couldn't undo the historical damage.

Timeline Continued (b)

1934- December: The "Yearbook of Agriculture" for 1934 announces, "Approximately 35 million acres of formerly cultivated land have essentially been destroyed for crop production. . . . 100 million acres now in crops have lost all or most of the topsoil; 125 million acres of land now in crops are rapidly losing topsoil. . . ."

1935- January 15: The federal government forms a Drought Relief Service to coordinate relief activities. The DRS bought cattle in counties that were designated emergency areas, for \$14 to \$20 a head. Those unfit for human consumption - more than 50 percent at the beginning of the program - were destroyed. The remaining cattle were given to the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation to be used in food distribution to families nationwide. Although it was difficult for farmers to give up their herds, the cattle slaughter program helped many of them avoid bankruptcy. "The government cattle buying program was a God-send to many farmers, as they could not afford to keep their cattle, and the government paid a better price than they could obtain in local markets."

Timeline Continued (c)

1935- April 8: FDR approves the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, which provides \$525 million for drought relief, and authorizes creation of the Works Progress Administration, which would employ 8.5 million people.

April 14: Black Sunday. The worst "black blizzard" of the Dust Bowl occurs, causing extensive damage.

April 27: Congress declares soil erosion "a national menace" in an act establishing the Soil Conservation Service in the Department of Agriculture (formerly the Soil Erosion Service in the U.S. Department of Interior). Under the direction of Hugh H. Bennett, the SCS developed extensive conservation programs that retained topsoil and prevented irreparable damage to the land. Farming techniques such as strip cropping, terracing, crop rotation, contour plowing, and cover crops were advocated. Farmers were paid to practice soil-conserving farming techniques.

December: At a meeting in Pueblo, Colorado, experts estimate that 850,000,000 tons of topsoil has blown off the Southern Plains during the course of the year, and that if the drought continued, the total area affected would increase from 4,350,000 acres to 5,350,000 acres in the spring of 1936. C.H. Wilson of the Resettlement Administration proposes buying up 2,250,000 acres and retiring it from cultivation.

Timeline Continued (d)

1936- February: Los Angeles Police Chief James E. Davis sends 125 policemen to patrol the borders of Arizona and Oregon to keep "undesirables" out. As a result, the American Civil Liberties Union sues the city.

May: The SCS publishes a soil conservation district law, which, if passed by the states, allows farmers to set up their own districts to enforce soil conservation practices for five-year periods. One of the few grassroots organizations set up by the New Deal still in operation, the soil conservation district program recognized that new farming methods needed to be accepted and enforced by the farmers on the land rather than bureaucrats in Washington.

1937- March: FDR's Shelterbelt Project begins. The project called for large-scale planting of trees across the Great Plains, stretching in a 100-mile wide zone from Canada to northern Texas, to protect the land from erosion. Native trees, such as red cedar and green ash, were planted along fence rows separating properties, and farmers were paid to plant and cultivate them. The project was estimated to cost 75 million dollars over a period of 12 years. When disputes arose over funding sources (the project was considered to be a long-term strategy, and therefore ineligible for emergency relief funds), FDR transferred the program to the WPA, where the project had limited success.

Timeline Wrap-Up

1938

The extensive work re-plowing the land into furrows, planting trees in shelterbelts, and other conservation methods has resulted in a 65 percent reduction in the amount of soil blowing. However, the drought continued.

1939

In the fall, the rain comes, finally bringing an end to the drought. During the next few years, with the coming of World War II, the country is pulled out of the Depression and the plains once again become golden with wheat.

Documentary



Stinging Dust & Forgotten Lives
Source: TCP Films (<http://tcpfilms.com/studio/sdfl/>)

Review

What were the causes of the Dust Bowl?

What was the "Okie" Migration?

How was the Dust Bowl resolved?