DUST BOWL

From 1930 to 1941, severe drought, heat, and high winds created almost intolerable living conditions for residents of Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. Labeled the dust bowl, this region received a double dose of hard luck in not only extreme weather but also the Great Depression. The epicenter of the dust bowl lay in the Oklahoma panhandle, and the area of drought, heat and wind radiated outward from there in all directions.

The origin of the dust bowl lies in a combination of greed, ignorance and environmental factors. Following World War I much of the population of Europe depended heavily on U.S. farmers and ranchers for its survival. This almost total reliance on U.S. agriculture created high demand, resulting in an agricultural boom time that swept over the Great Plains. Farmers on the Great Plains, seeing an opportunity for large profit, began cultivating as much land as possible. Acre upon acre of marginal and submarginal land was plowed to make way for wheat and other high-profit crops. Worried little or not at all about soil or water conservation, most farmers and ranchers ignored warnings from government officials and continued with wasteful, old-fashioned farming methods.

In the late 1920s as severe drought and high heat hit the plains, strong winds began to carry the topsoil from the fragile newly plowed lands. Huge dust storms resulting from severe soil erosion filled the sky, covering towns and farms. Combined with environmental factors, economic woes as well began to hit the Great Plains. Farmers were glutting the market with overproduction and crop and livestock prices began falling to record lows. Arching over all was the economic turmoil of the Great Depression; the farmers and ranchers of the Great Plains were in serious trouble.

For residents of the dust bowl the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 brought a renewed hope for improvement. With his talk of a New Deal for the American people, Roosevelt appeared to many dust bowl residents as their last chance to save their homes, families and farms. Historians sometimes speak of the New Deal as having three main elements: relief, recovery and reform. These three terms can also be used as a framework with which to discuss the New Deal as it affected the dust bowl.

RELIEF

Several of Roosevelt's programs, especially in the early days of the New Deal, were intended to bring immediate and direct aid to those dust bowl residents with the most need. While a few of these needy allowed pride and independence to stand in the way of such offers of help, critical conditions on the plains soon forced even the most reluctant of them into acceptance.

On June 9, 1934 Roosevelt asked Congress for $525 million in drought relief for the farmers and ranchers of the dust bowl. Approved in the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act in 1935, the relief funds were used for emergency livestock feed loans, to purchase livestock for feeding those starving in urban areas, government jobs for out-of-work farmers, seed for farmers and the construction of work camps for out-of-work youths.

Also in 1935, the Resettlement Administration was enacted and placed under the supervision of Rexford Tugwell, an agriculturist and one of Roosevelt's advisers on the dust bowl issue. Like many of Tugwell's plans, the resettlement idea was considered too radical by most farmers and many politicians.

Under Tugwell's plan, farmers living on submarginal lands, or even those families who were merely too far in debt to pull themselves out, would be bought out of the farms they inhabited and relocated to more profitable areas. Farmers who feared resettlement often armed themselves and vowed to fight to the death to stay on their land regardless of how unprofitable it was. Other opponents of the Resettlement Administration included large-scale farmers who feared that the government, by resettling families on profitable land, would merely create more competition. Although attempted for several years, the resettlement program never attained even a moderate level of success.

Other New Deal programs, such as the Farm Security Administration and Federal Emergency Relief Administration, made sure that families and individuals received food, clothing, shelter and other necessities. Families or individuals who refused to accept the donations outright, could enroll in a work project improving roads, building dams or doing some other work in their area.
A farm family flees a dust storm on the lower Great Plains in the early 1930s. (Brown Brothers)

Direct federal relief was the least desired of the government programs, because for many farmers, receiving the aid was the final admission of defeat or failure. Despite the stigma attached to such aid, it was estimated that at one point over 90 percent of the farmers in Oklahoma alone were receiving some type of direct government aid. While Oklahoma is considered the state most affected by the dust bowl, the numbers of aid recipients for surrounding states was almost as high.

RECOVERY

In addition to direct relief, Roosevelt and his advisers designed programs based mainly on incentives that
would help farmers and ranchers in their recovery from the drought and Depression. Most of these recovery programs fell under the auspices of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) created in 1933, and worked on the theory of “planned scarcity.” These recovery plans provided funds to purchase livestock from ranchers and to pay farmers a certain amount for every acre left uncultivated. The goal of planned scarcity was to reduce the amount of grain and food on the market, theoretically raising prices and benefiting farmers, ranchers, and those who depended on their success.

The amount of livestock purchased by the U.S. Government increased drastically as rainfall and production throughout the dust bowl decreased. By 1935, the federal government had become the largest cattle owner in the world. In 1934, almost $1 million dollars in subsidies was paid to Cimarron County farmers in Oklahoma to cut back on the amount of crops raised in their fields. By the end of the 1930s the AAA had enrolled a majority of the dust bowl farmers into these cutback programs. In Haskell County, Kansas, more than 90 percent of the farmers were receiving farm subsidies for leaving a portion of their fields uncultivated.

These government subsidy programs were never meant as a permanent solution to problems. Ultimately, it was hoped that the cutback and livestock buyout programs would help in the recovery of the agriculture markets, whereupon the farmers and ranchers would be set on their own independent means again. In the end, most of the AAA reduction schemes must be considered a failure. If some farmers did agree to decrease production, inevitably others increased production, hoping to take advantage of the expected
higher crop prices. Also, these plans tended to favor the large-scale wealthier farmers. The more land they held, the more land they could leave uncultivated and the more money they received, while farmers holding only small bits of land were paid relatively small subsidies, provided they could afford to leave any land at all uncultivated. Later research revealed that under the programs of the AAA crop production in most dust bowl states actually increased, thereby insuring lower prices and further damage to the already weakened soil.

**REFORM (CONSERVATION)**

It was perhaps in the area of conservation that Roosevelt and his New Deal advisers achieved their greatest success. With the introduction of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in 1935, the federal government began educating farmers in environmentally friendly farming techniques, such as shelterbelts, crop rotation, the introduction of soil-stabilizing grasses, terracing, and contour plowing.

The shelterbelt program was a pet project of Roosevelt’s that, with the creation of the SCS, he was able to see come to fruition in 1937. Shelterbelts, essentially rows of trees used to block damaging winds, had been used with great success during European droughts and Roosevelt and his advisers felt the concept would work equally well in the United States. The first shelterbelts were planted in Oklahoma. In a line extending from northern Texas to the Canadian border, rows upon rows of trees were planted around and along arid farm fields. The belts proved effective where planted, but the vast areas encompassed by the dust bowl and the expense of shelterbelt construction—an estimated $75 million over twelve years—ultimately limited the use and appeal of the concept.

Another dust bowl experiment of the New Deal involved the “listing” of fields. The lister, a large double-sided plow, created huge furrows in the land that disrupted the flow of wind. Farmers received federal funds to aid them in the listing project. Participants were paid either twenty cents for every acre they themselves listed or forty cents for every acre if they had someone else do the work. By working with farmers in the listing project, government advisers could also educate farmers in the concepts of terracing and contour plowing. The listing project proved extremely successful: it saved vast sections of farmland from destruction, educated farmers in techniques that are still in used today, such as contouring and terracing, and at the very least helped farmers to maintain their equipment and keep things in running order.

Elements of listing, contouring, and terracing were utilized throughout the 1930s and the number of farmers involved in the projects increased annually as the techniques proved successful. Throughout the decade an average of 8 million acres a year were plowed according to the tenets of the SCS, saving them from the ravages of wind and erosion. These conservation elements were considered such an important asset in the battle against the dust bowl elements that in Kansas and Texas fines were levied against farmers not complying with the SCS measures.

Similar to Tugwell’s resettlement plans was the idea behind the Land Use Planning Division and the Tri-State Land Utilization and Conservation Project. Under these two subbranches of the AAA, land that had been entirely consumed by the roving dunes of sand was purchased outright from the resident families. Although initially garnering very few takers, by the late 1930s hundreds of families had accepted the government buyout programs and headed, they hoped, for greener pastures. By 1947, when submarginal purchase officially ended, over $47.5 million had been spent and acreage equal to that of Vermont and Massachusetts had been purchased. The acquired lands were later added to Indian reservations or turned into wildlife refuges or national grasslands.

**CONCLUSION**

In the end, the agricultural plans implemented by Roosevelt and his advisers never achieved the sweeping changes hoped for. Relief programs fed, sheltered, and clothed the needy but did little to permanently improve conditions. The most radical relief plan and perhaps the one that held the greatest chance for success, the Resettlement Administration, was one of the most despised of all New Deal policies. Farmers and politicians alike refused to support or cooperate with Roosevelt on this matter. The recovery concept of planned scarcity also had little effect on Great Plains residents. Under the plan, some farmers did indeed leave fields fallow or slaughtered livestock in order to receive government aid, but ultimately production increased under this plan negating any good that might have been achieved.

The policies promoting soil and water conservation were arguably the only elements of Roosevelt’s agricultural plans that had any lasting effect. Elements of conservation such as terracing, contour plowing, and listing reduced topsoil erosion during the 1930s and are still used on present-day farms. The government
purchase of submarginal lands and lands totally consumed by sand resulted in millions of acres being turned over to Native Americans or reserved for public use.

The return of rains and cooler temperatures gradually brought an end to drought conditions on the plains. Historians cite 1941 as the official end of the dust bowl era. While rain settled the dust on the plains, entry of the United States into World War II settled the matter of the Great Depression. Jobs and good wages sparked by wartime production turned an economic bust into a boom. While Roosevelt's New Deal policies for the dust bowl actually did, in the end, very little for most residents of the plains, the hope and trust that he inspired with his programs undoubtedly helped people to endure and persevere during a time of desolation and tragedy.

Steven Kite

EDUCATION

America's educational system was in dire shape when Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in March 1933. In Alabama, 85 percent of the public schools were closed as tax revenues evaporated. Dr. A. F. Harmon, the state superintendent of education, reported, "Despite all the sacrifices by teachers, the schools of fifty counties [out of Alabama's sixty-seven] were closed." As of the first of April, he noted that "7,000 teachers were out of work, and the doors of 2,400 school buildings were closed in the faces of 265,000" students. Many of the unemployed teachers had not been paid for three to eight months and others not for a year.

Dr. Harmon also remarked that average annual salaries of $140 had been paid partly in cash and partly in scrip for two years, but merchants had increasingly balked at accepting the latter. Evoking echoes of the district schools of the 1830s, a century earlier, some teachers in Alabama were working simply for room and board in a community round robin.

Urban schools fared somewhat better. In New York City, the first response by the board of education was to slash salaries from 6 to 33 percent, effective January 1933. The second response was to cut salaries indirectly by the introduction in 1934 of "payless furloughs," that is, working without pay for one or several weeks.

As elsewhere in the country, Chicago's teachers were subject to the litany of pay cuts, payless furloughs, increased work loads, and fear of unemployment. Like their colleagues in New York, moments of desperation aroused teachers. In April 1933, 5,000 militant Chicago teachers, wearing armbands signifying that they had not been paid for ten months, stormed five city banks to negotiate their warrants—to no avail. Nonpayment of teachers' salaries stretched out to two years.

In Seattle, along with pay cuts, teachers received sporadic pay warrants that were often discounted by merchants and at other times nonnegotiable. As local tax collections diminished, the warrants drawn on the county treasury became essentially promissory notes. Monthly pay consisted for a time of a $50 warrant and the remainder in $10 denominations to facilitate payment of bills without receiving change in cash. In addition, a clause was inserted into the 1933 teacher's contract that each teacher would not be paid for three weeks during the school year as an economy measure. The payless furlough had arrived in Seattle, too.

DUNNING OF TEACHERS

Adding insult to teachers' salary slashes and payless furloughs was the role of involuntary teacher philanthropy. Throughout the decade, the dunning of teach-

See also: agriculture; Grapes of Wrath, The; Okies; Agricultural Adjustment Act (1933); Hickok, Lorena; Lange, Dorothea; Steinbeck, John; Document: Agricultural Adjustment Act, May 12, 1933.

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