

History of Soil Conservation – Supervisor Training Section

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While soil conservation districts had their baptism by fire following the devastation of the 1930s Dust Bowl, the movement got its beginning decades earlier. It was championed by Hugh Hammond Bennett, a young college graduate who went to work as a soil surveyor for USDA in 1905.

Now recognized as the “father of soil conservation,” Bennett spent 20 years trying to bring attention to the nation’s eroded soils and the need for conservation. Lawmakers finally started to listen in the late 1920s, and the Dust Bowl — a drought that led to massive dust storms and topsoil losses across a swath land reaching

from Texas to Canada — fueled the movement.

The groundwork for the Dust Bowl was laid in the early 1900s when high demand for wheat, generous federal farm policies and a series of wet years caused a land boom in the Great Plains. New machinery made for easier and faster farming, and vast tracts of native grasslands in the Plains — more than 100 million acres — were plowed to plant crops, according to the USDA.

But the stock market crashed in 1929, and the Great Depression followed. Wheat prices plummeted, and farmers in the Plains plowed up even more land to try to recoup their losses. Prices dropped further, and drought conditions set in, causing widespread crop failure. Many farmers abandoned their fields to find work elsewhere, leaving behind a landscape that had changed from protective grassland to exposed soil.

The result was large dust storms that blew exposed soil as far as the East Coast. Bennett seized the opportunity to explain the cause of the dust storms to Congress and push for a permanent soil conservation agency. The Soil Conservation Service was created in 1935, and Bennett served as its first chief. Its predecessor, the temporary Soil Erosion Service — also led by Bennett — had established demonstration projects to show landowners the benefits of conservation. In 1994, Congress gave the Soil Conservation Service a new name: the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

As early as 1935, USDA managers began to search for ways to extend conservation assistance to more farmers, believing the solution was to establish democratically organized soil conservation districts to lead the conservation effort at the local level.

To that end, USDA drafted the Standard State Soil Conservation District Law, which President Franklin Delano Roosevelt sent to the governors of all states in 1937. The first conservation district was organized in the Brown Creek watershed of North Carolina that same year.

Across the United States, nearly 3,000 conservation districts—almost one in every county—work directly with landowners to conserve and promote healthy soils, water, forests and wildlife. NACD represents these districts and the more than 17,000 citizens who serve on conservation district governing boards.

Conservation districts may go by different names—“soil and water conservation districts,” “resource conservation districts,” “natural resource districts” and “land conservation committees”—but they all share a single mission: to coordinate assistance from all available sources—public and private, local, state and federal—to develop locally-driven solutions to natural resources concerns.

In addition to serving as coordinators for conservation in the field, districts:

- Implement farm, ranch and forestland conservation practices to protect soil productivity, water quality and quantity, air quality and wildlife habitat;
- Conserve and restore wetlands, which purify water and provide habitat for birds, fish and other animals;
- Protect groundwater resources;
- Assist communities and homeowners in planting trees and other land cover to hold soil in place, clean the air, provide cover for wildlife, and beautify neighborhoods;
- Help developers control soil erosion and protect water and air quality during construction; and
- Reach out to communities and schools to teach the value of natural resources and encourage conservation efforts.

For more information view - YouTube – Hugh Hammond Bennett: The Story of America’s Private Lands Conservation Movement.