

SCS becomes reality after Dust Bowl shocks nation

WASHINGTON — Fifty years ago, the U.S. Congress watched as the nation endured two mammoth dust storms that seemed to confirm the dire predictions of a dedicated conservationist.

The storms were no mere local disturbances. For three days in May 1934, topsoil blew from the vast area between the Mexican border and the Canadian border and carried it thousands of miles east over the Atlantic Ocean and onto ships at sea.

"This spectacular dust cloud was the first one in history big enough to retain its identity as it swept across the country from the Great Plains to beyond the Atlantic Coast," said Hugh Hammond Bennett, the conservationist who had first warned congress. It blotted out the sun over a large part of the Nation and sifted through the windows of New York's skyscrapers. When that happened, it began to dawn on the public that something had gone wrong with the land resources of this Nation."

Bennett had first mounted his campaign in the 1920s, warning the nation about the danger of soil erosion. Slowly his message was heard, as first a Soil Erosion Service was established in 1933, and Bennett was named its director.

The second great dust storm in March 1935 proved to be all the stimulus Congress needed. The storm blew soil particles from Kansas, Colorado, Texas and Oklahoma over Washington and other eastern cities. And Congress responded by passing the Soil Conservation Act of 1935 fifty years ago today.

Over the years, the Soil Conservation Service has enjoyed the good will of both Congress and the public. The current national program for soil and water conservation adopted by USDA gives priority to reducing excessive soil erosion on crop, pasture, and forest lands; conserving water used in agriculture; reducing upstream flood damages; and improving water quality. These priorities were developed in response to the Soil and Water Conservation Act of 1977.

Compared to the poor conservation record of the 1930s, current programs are indeed encouraging.

Conservation Tillage: Under the 327 million acres planted to crops in 1984, farmers used conservation tillage on nearly 97 million acres. This is tillage that retains at least 30 percent residue cover on the surface soil. Farmers use the no-till method in which only a narrow seedbed is disturbed for planting on 14 million acres. Pennsylvania farmers were quick to adopt conservation tillage, using it on 1.36 million acres or 44% of the State's cropland.

Targeting: By targeting funds and technical staff to the Nation's most serious natural resource problems, SCS, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS), and other USDA agencies helped reduce soil erosion and save water in 44 states. During the past year, farmers and ranchers reduced soil erosion in targeted areas by nearly 7 ton per acre, and water losses by 540,000 acre-feet through increased application of soil conservation and water management practices. Fourteen counties in southeastern Pennsylvania are in the targeted Mason-Dixon Erosion Control Area.

Small Watershed Projects: SCS began construction on 20 new Public Law 83-566 Small Watershed Projects in 1984; approved planning for 34 projects; authorized installation of 19 projects; and completed construction on or closed out 11 projects. This State has 31 approved watershed projects—5 in the planning stage and 26 in operation.

Mine Reclamation: SCS assists landowners in reclaiming abandoned coal mine land under the Rural Abandoned Mine Program (RAMP). Pennsylvania leads with the largest amount of abandoned strip mine land in the Nation. By the end of 1984, SCS in Pennsylvania had eliminated 162 health and safety hazards, carried out 722 acres of erosion control, and 680 acres of visual improvement, and improved water quality in over 83 miles of streams and 9,725 acres of lakes. A total of 78 RAMP projects completed in the six-year history of the program had a total cost of \$10.8 million in the Keystone State. One-fourth of the RAMP work in the Nation was completed in Pennsylvania.

Rural Development: In fiscal year 1984, SCS assisted over 29,000 units of government in rural communities to control flooding, reduce roadside erosion, improve the landscape, and preserve historical and cultural resources. Much of this work was accomplished through multicounty resource conservation and development projects which operate with SCS guidance. RC&D areas cover 35 counties in the Keystone State.

With other USDA agencies and Rural Development Committees, SCS conducted rural development workshops for locally elected officials across the State.

Water Quality Program: SCS provided technical assistance in developing 1,532 water quality plans. By the end of fiscal year 1984, SCS had signed contracts with over 1,200 individuals to protect water quality by applying conservation on over 170,000 acres in areas such as the Conestoga River Rural Clean Water Project in Lancaster County. The Service is also accelerating help in farm waste management as a part of the Chesapeake Bay cleanup.

Emergency Assistance: Under Section 403 of the Agricultural Credit Act of 1978, SCS obligated an estimated \$2.8 million in watershed emergency assistance to help Pennsylvania. Other funds from this authority were being used in Mississippi, California, Arkansas, Utah, Connecticut and other states to repair damage caused by floods and other natural disasters.

Farmland Inventory: SCS leads USDA efforts for inventorying the Nation's Important Farmlands. SCS has published Important Farmland Maps which located Prime and Unique Lands for 911 counties, 15 of which are in Pennsylvania. Another 374 maps are nearly completed. In cooperation with other Federal agencies, SCS has acquired infrared and black and white aerial photographs covering 94 percent of the continental United States.

Fish and Wildlife: SCS helped land users improve wildlife habitat on one-half million acres of wetland and 10 million acres of upland areas. They also assisted with water facilities benefitting wildlife on 50,000 acres.

Plant Materials: SCS Plant Materials Centers released 14 conservation plants in 1984. The release includes nine grasses for forage adapted to different parts of the country, a legume for forage, wildlife food and erosion control, and four shrubs—one for stabilizing streambanks, one for providing ground cover, and two for providing food and cover for wildlife.



BEFORE--The lines were straight, even if the hills and valleys weren't. No one could say farmers in Lancaster County's Chestnut Level area couldn't plow a straight line, especially after looking at this 1937 aerial photo. Unfortunately, the tillage pattern didn't do much to conserve soil.



AFTER--Today's practices result in a crazy quilt pattern that not only looks colorful from the air, but also reduces soil erosion significantly.

Honey Hollow was first 'total' upland site

DOYLESTOWN — The Honey Hollow Watershed conservation site is the first small upland watershed to be brought totally under water, soil, and wildlife conservation practices in the United States. It was established in 1939 by six farmers living on William Penn Lands in southeastern Pennsylvania who invited the then newly formed USDA Soil Conservation Service to counsel them in controlling erosion.

The Honey Hollow Watershed comprises some 500 acres of farmland with fields, forests, ponds, and streams on which colonial farmers built their substantial and beautiful field stone houses which stand today as testimony to the worth of this soil.

Dr. Hugh Bennett, first Chief of SCS, took great interest of the work of these Honey Hollow farmers and often said to them, "Poor land

makes poor farmers; good soils make substantial farmers."

In the spring of 1939, some of the farmers living in this area realized that they had an erosion problem and sought help from the regional office of SCS in Philadelphia. SCS assisted the farmers in developing a plan of soil and water conservation practices for each landowner. Practices were agreed upon and thus the Honey Hollow project took shape and transformed the land during the next two years.

The conservation program has continued ever since by the six farmers each doing his own work but all following the plans and layouts as developed with SCS.

Today, the contour strips lay across all the fields. Sound forestry practices have been observed. Wildlife hedges are lush, full grown, and have produced food and cover for many generations of

birds and animals. Five ponds were built and stocked with fish.

In broad terms, the land in Honey Hollow lies secure against the elements and works in harmony with nature.

Dr. Bennett made this statement regarding the historic watershed, "We owe these farmers a debt of gratitude for what they have done. Not only for the soil they have protected, but also for showing us that it can be done as they have done it. In spite of many handicaps and with only limited help, they have put a big program into effect all over their watershed."

This farming area in southeastern Pennsylvania was among the very earliest settled lands in our country. There are three early 18th Century houses in Honey Hollow today. They are presently owned by the Crooks, the

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