**The Dust Bowl, 1934-1938**

**Table of Contents:**[Further Readings](http://find.galegroup.com/srcx/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=Relevance&prodId=SRC-4&tabID=T001&subjectParam=Locale%2528en%252C%252C%2529%253AFQE%253D%2528su%252CNone%252C13%2529The%2BDust%2BBowl%2524&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R1&displaySubject=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3AFQE%3D%28SU%2CNone%2C13%29The+Dust+Bowl%24&subjectAction=DISPLAY_SUBJECTS&inPS=true&userGroupName=cobb90289&sgCurrentPosition=0&contentSet=GSRC&docId=EJ2104241275&docType=GSRC#FurtherReadings) | [View Multimedia File(s)](http://find.galegroup.com/srcx/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=Relevance&prodId=SRC-4&tabID=T001&subjectParam=Locale%2528en%252C%252C%2529%253AFQE%253D%2528su%252CNone%252C13%2529The%2BDust%2BBowl%2524&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R1&displaySubject=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3AFQE%3D%28SU%2CNone%2C13%29The+Dust+Bowl%24&subjectAction=DISPLAY_SUBJECTS&inPS=true&userGroupName=cobb90289&sgCurrentPosition=0&contentSet=GSRC&docId=EJ2104241275&docType=GSRC#ViewMultimediaFiles)

Disastrouswind erosion of farm land

**Principal personages**

* FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT (1882-1945), thirty-second President of the United States 1933-1945
* HUGH HAMMOND BENNETT (1881-1960), chief of the Soil Conservation Service
* CHESTER DAVIS (1887-1975), director of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration
* FERDINAND A. SILCOX (1882-1939), Chief Forester of the United States
* MORRIS L. COOKE (1872-1960), Chairman of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee and of the Great Plains Committee
* HARLAN H. BARROWS (1877-1960), Chairman of the Northern Great Plains Committee

**Summary of Event**

Farmers all across the Great Plains apprehensively watched the skies during the spring of 1934. Day after day the weather offered no relief; intense sun, wind, drought, more sun, then gales. On April 14, massive clouds of **dust** blotted out the sun over western Kansas. At first the wind raced along the surface, tearing at the stunted wheat and licking up the topsoil. Then the **dust** thickened into low, heavy, dirt-laden clouds. From a distance, the storm had the appearance of a cumulus cloud, but it was black, not white; and it seemed to eat its way along with a rolling, churning motion. As the storm swept toward Oklahoma and Texas, the black clouds engulfed the landscape. Birds and jack rabbits fled before it, and people scurried to safety. For those at the storm center, there was an eerie sensation of silence and darkness. There was little or no visibility, and wind velocity hit forty to fifty miles per hour. The next month was exceedingly hot with the temperature above one hundred degrees every day. On May 10, the gales returned, this time from the west. Unlike the previous storm, these winds whipped up a formless, light brown fog that spread over an area nine hundred miles wide and fifteen hundred miles long. During the next day, an estimated twelve million tons of soil fell on Chicago, and **dust** darkened the skies over Cleveland. On May 12, **dust** hung like a pall over the entire Eastern seaboard. These two storms alone blew 650,000,000 tons of topsoil off the plains.

The **Dust** **Bowl** covered 300,000 square miles of territory—Kansas, Texas, western Oklahoma, eastern Colorado, and New Mexico. In the hardest-hit areas, agriculture virtually ceased. With successive storms, the wind and the flying **dust** cut off the wheat stalks at ground level and tore out the roots. Blowing dirt shifted from one field to another, burying crops not yet carried away from the wind. Cattle tried to eat the **dust**-laden grass and filled their stomachs with fatal "mud balls." The **dust** banked against houses and farm buildings like snow, and buried fences up to the post tops. Dirt penetrated into automobile engines and clogged the vital parts. Housewives fought vainly to keep it out of their homes; but it seeped in through cracks and crevices, through wet blankets hung over windows, through oiled cloths and tape, covering everything with grit. Hospitals reported hundreds of patients suffering from "**dust** pneumonia." The black blizzards struck so suddenly that many farmers became lost in their own fields and suffocated, some literally within yards of shelter. Over 350,000 people fled the Great Plains in the 1930's. The "Okies" loaded their meager household goods on flivvers and struck out along Route 66 for California.

Wind and drought alone did not create the **Dust** **Bowl**. Man had disturbed nature's delicate balance of wind, rain, and grass. Fifty years earlier, a strong, protective carpet of buffalo grass had covered the Great Plains. The grass held moisture in the soil and kept the soil from blowing away. In dry years, the wind blew out huge craters, later mistakenly called "buffalo wallows"; but as long as the turf remained, the land could recover. By about 1890, farmers began staking out homesteads in regions once considered too arid for use as anything but range land. Wherever they went, they plowed under the buffalo grass. During World War I, the demand for wheat, along with the fortuitous invention of the tractor, meant plowing larger areas of the virgin grassland. Between 1914 and 1917, the area of wheat planted increased to 27,000,000 acres; over forty percent of this land was being plowed for the first time. After the war, the plowing continued. Larger tractors and combines, new machines that could harvest and thresh grain in one operation, inaugurated the age of the wheat kings. By 1930, there were almost three times as many acres in wheat production as ten years earlier, and the tractors were still tearing open the turf. The plow had exposed the land to rain, wind, and sun. By 1932, the earth on the plains was ready to blow.

The **Dust** **Bowl** speeded the development of long-range federal programs in the new field of soil conservation. A veteran conservationist, Franklin D. Roosevelt in late 1933 created the Soil Erosion Service, later the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), with Hugh Bennett as its head. The SCS's task was to supply technical assistance and leadership, while local soil conservation districts carried out Bennett's program of strip crops, contour plowing, stubble-mulch farming, and terracing. More dramatically, the Forest Service under Ferdinand A. Silcox in 1934 started planting a "shelter belt" of trees, within a 100-mile wide zone, from Canada to the Texas Panhandle. Ten years later, more than 200,000,000 cottonwoods and other varieties of trees were serving as wind breaks and helping to conserve moisture. In 1936, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), directed by Chester Davies, adopted soil conservation as a subterfuge to get around an unfavorable Supreme Court decision; but on the Great Plains, soil conservation was a legitimate part of the AAA program. Farmers received government checks for both acreage reductions and wind control practices.

After 1936, the New Deal added little to its conservation program. Roosevelt did appoint two special committees under the chairmanship of Morris L. Cooke, one to study **Dust** **Bowl** conditions and the other to recommend specific legislation. Congress passed a water storage bill along the lines that the latter committee had suggested, but did little else. In 1939 Harlan H. Barrows reported for the Committee on the Northern Great Plains but again, little was done.

Although it achieved less than it might have, the New Deal did much to hasten recovery in the **Dust** **Bowl**; more importantly, the rains began anew. As the buffalo grass spread again, the blow area rapidly shrank from 8,727,000 acres in 1938 to 1,200,000 in 1939. Yet, there was constant danger that farmers would forget the terrible lessons of the drought and that the **Dust** **Bowl** would once again recur.

**Source Citation:**

"The Dust Bowl, 1934-1938." *DISCovering U.S. History*. Online ed. Detroit: Gale, 2003. *Student Resource Center - Junior*. Gale. Cobb County Schools. 24 June 2013 <http://find.galegroup.com/srcx/infomark.do?&source=gale&srcprod=SRCJ&userGroupName=cobb90289&prodId=SRC-4&tabID=T001&docId=EJ2104241275&type=retrieve&contentSet=GSRC&version=1.0>.