

About The Dust Bowl



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. [\[source\]](#)

The Dust Bowl



[\[Map source\]](#)



The Dust Bowl of the 1930s lasted about a decade. Its primary area of impact was on the southern Plains. The northern Plains were not so badly effected, but nonetheless, the drought, windblown dust and agricultural decline were no strangers to the north. In fact the agricultural devastation helped to lengthen the Depression whose effects were felt worldwide. The movement of people on the Plains was also profound.

As John Steinbeck wrote in his 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*: "And then the dispossessed were drawn west- from Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico; from Nevada and Arkansas, families, tribes, dusted out, tractored out. Car-loads, caravans, homeless and hungry; twenty thousand and fifty thousand and a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand. They streamed over the mountains, hungry and restless - restless as ants, scurrying to find work to do - to lift, to push, to pull, to pick, to cut - anything, any burden to bear, for food. The kids are hungry. We got no place to live. Like ants scurrying for work, for food, and most of all for land."

Poor agricultural practices and years of sustained drought caused the Dust Bowl. Plains grasslands had been deeply plowed and planted to wheat. During the years when there was adequate rainfall, the land produced bountiful crops. But as the droughts of the early 1930s deepened, the farmers kept plowing and planting and nothing would grow. The ground cover that held the soil in place was gone. The Plains winds whipped across the fields raising billowing clouds of dust to the skys. The skys could darken for days, and even the most well sealed homes could have a thick layer of dust on furniture. In some places the dust would drift like snow, covering farmsteads.



Timeline of The Dust Bowl

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.

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.

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.

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.

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."

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.

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: Roosevelt addresses the nation in his second inaugural address, stating, "I see one-third of the nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished . . . the test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little." 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.

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.

[Timeline Source](#)

Return to [The Great Depression](#)