

Erosion of the Land

In response to federal government incentives to expand agricultural lands in order to feed war-torn Europe following World War I, millions of acres of grassland in the U.S. Great Plains were plowed under and planted into row crops during the 1920s. Desperate to increase their income, farmers over-plowed, over-planted, and over-grazed the land. Then, during the Great Depression of the 1930s severe drought and plummeting agriculture prices combined to cause the Dust Bowl disaster. The federal government responded with a variety of programs that encouraged farmers to use soil conservation methods that would help conserve soil fertility and stop the severe erosion. However, tenants didn't want to invest in conservation measures for land that wasn't theirs, and landowners during the Great Depression couldn't afford to pay for soil conservation methods that might not see benefits for several years.



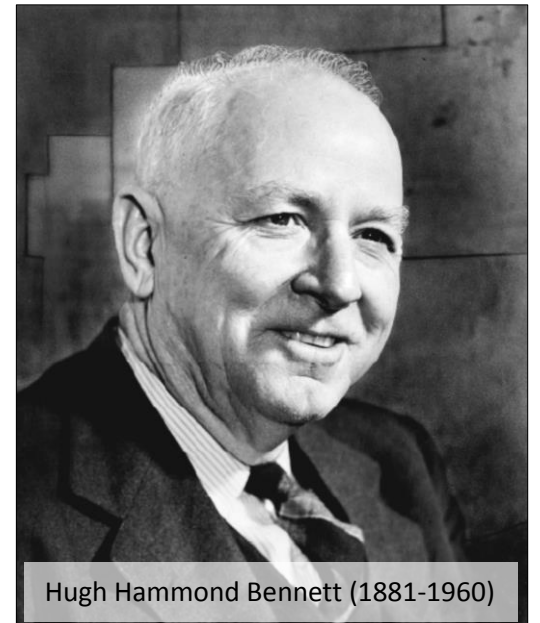
Soil erosion in Richardson County, Nebraska – 1936
Arthur Rothstein, Farm Security Administration

Federal agricultural programs introduced during the 1930s eventually changed how and what farmers planted by paying them to plant certain crops — or paying farmers not to produce a crop by letting the land lie idle or fallow. These programs also encouraged farmers to rotate their crops from year-to-year, to practice contour plowing, terracing of sloping land, and “listing” fields to prevent soil erosion. By the late 1930s conservation measures began paying off.

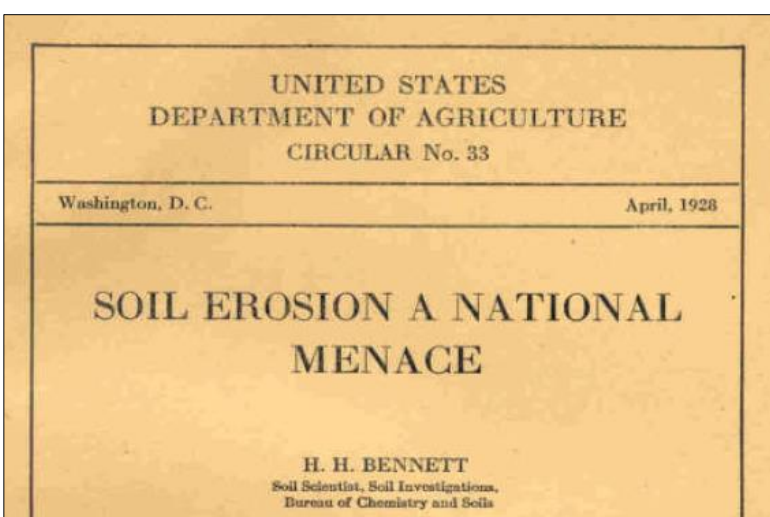


A farmer ‘listing’ his fields creating deep ridges and furrows to prevent wind erosion – Dona Ana County, New Mexico April 1936 – Arthur Rothstein

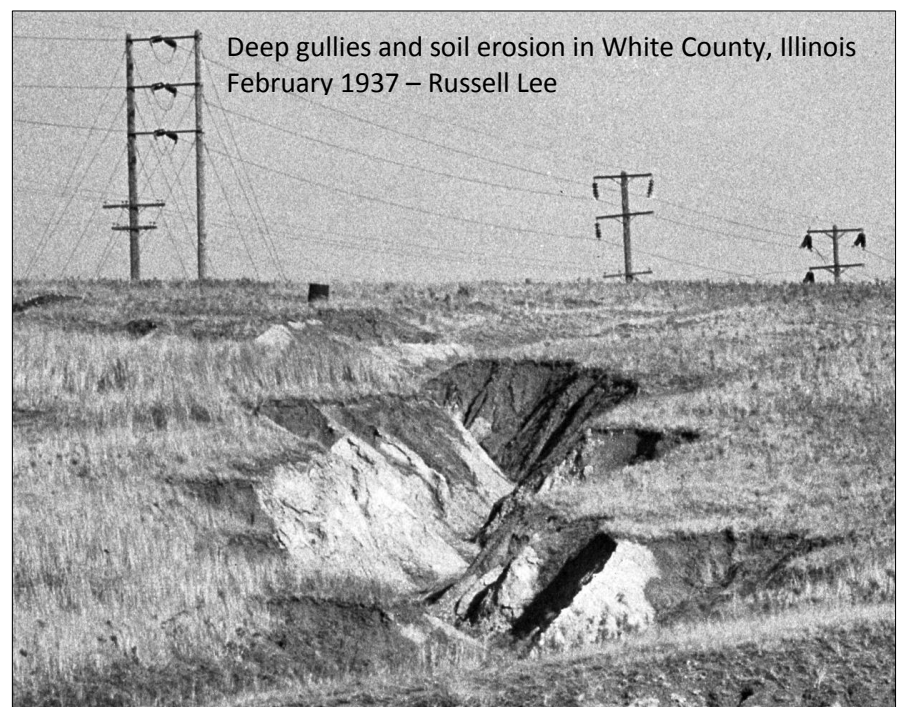
September 19, 1933 is an important milestone regarding federal soil and land conservation programs in the United States, which marked the creation of the Soil Erosion Service (SES) within the U.S. Department of Interior with Hugh Hammond Bennett as its Director. In 1928, after more than two decades of studying soils and soil erosion in the United States, Bennett — known as the “father of soil conservation” — authored the U.S. Department of Agriculture Circular 33 titled, “Soil Erosion A National Menace”. It was Bennett’s opinion that, “*soil erosion is the biggest problem confronting the farmers of the Nation over a tremendous part of its agricultural lands.*” The SES established several demonstration projects in critically eroded areas across the country to show landowners the benefits of conservation measures. Then on April 27, 1935, Congress passed Public Law 74-46, in which it recognized that, “*the wastage of soil and moisture resources on farm, grazing, and forest lands as a menace to the national welfare,*” and directed Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace to



Hugh Hammond Bennett (1881-1960)



establish the Soil Conservation Service as a permanent agency in the USDA. In 1994 Congress renamed the SCS to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).



Deep gullies and soil erosion in White County, Illinois February 1937 – Russell Lee

Credits: “Farming in the 1930s”,
http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/crops_09.html;
“75 Years Helping People Help the Land: A Brief History of NRCS”,
http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/about/history/?cid=nrcs143_021392;
“Hugh Hammond Bennett and the Creation of the Soil Erosion Service”,
http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1044444.pdf