

The Soil Conservation Service was created in 1935

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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. 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.

In 1994, Congress gave the Soil Conservation Service a new name: the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Boots on the ground

Today there are nearly 3,000 conservation districts across the country. And while their mission has evolved to also embrace water conservation and water and air quality, they remain focused on local boots-on-the-ground efforts.

“Conservation districts played a pivotal role following the Great Depression, and they’re as relevant now as they ever have been,” Brent Van Dyke, president of the National Association of Conservation Districts, said.

The only way to feed a growing population is to be sustainable and good stewards of natural resources, he said. With a conservation district in nearly every county and parish in the U.S., districts are helping

1928 — Hugh Hammond Bennett publishes “Soil Erosion: a National Menace” influencing the creation of the first federal soil erosion experiment station.



Hugh H. Bennett

1932 — Dust Bowl begins on the Great Plains; Franklin Delano Roosevelt is elected president; soil and water conservation becomes a national priority.



A dust storm during the 1930s.

1933 — Congress passes the National Industrial Recovery Act with funding to fight soil erosion; the Soil Erosion Service is established in the Department of Interior with Hugh Bennett appointed as chief.

1935 — Congress passes the Soil Conservation Act creating the Soil Conservation Service in USDA; SCS begins expanding its soil conservation program.

1936 — SCS assumes responsibility for performing surveys and devising flood-control plans for selected watersheds under the Flood Control Act.

1937 — USDA drafts the Standard State Soil Conservation District Law. First soil conservation district is organized in the Brown Creek watershed of N. Carolina.

History of soil and water conservation

For 80 years, the mission of Natural Resources Conservation Service has been to help farmers take better care of their land.

Carol Ryan Dumas and Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

1938 — USDA makes SCS responsible for administering its drainage and irrigation assistance programs, snow survey, water supply forecasting and programs.

1944 — Congress passes the Flood Control Act authorizing SCS to begin work on its first 11 watershed projects.

1951 — Hugh Bennett steps down as SCS chief and retires the following year.

1952 — USDA merges the Soil Survey into SCS, transfers most of SCS’s research activities and land utilization projects between Agricultural Research Service and Forest Service.

1953 — USDA eliminates SCS’s regional offices and enhances the technical role of state offices; Congress passes the Agricultural Appropriations Act authorizing

an additional 63 watershed projects.

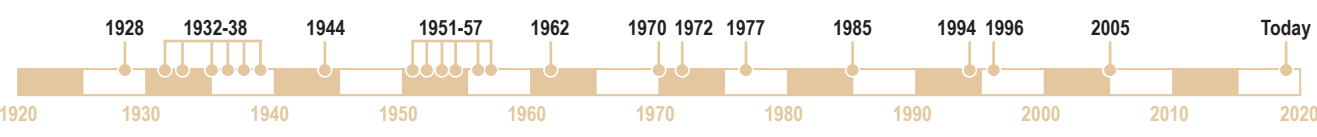
1954 — Congress passes the Watershed Protection and Flood Control Act giving SCS final watershed planning authority.

1956 — USDA establishes the Soil Bank Program and SCS begins providing technical assistance for the retired cropland program.

1957 — Congress approves the Great Plains Conservation Program authorizing SCS to provide financial and technical assistance for conservation in the Plains states.

1962 — USDA initiates the Resource Conservation and Development Program allowing SCS to work with landowners to develop long-term economic development plans for larger project areas.

Large-scale soil erosion on a U.S. farm.



farmers, ranchers and communities accomplish that.

Conservation districts work to protect soil productivity, water quality and quantity, air quality and wildlife habitat. They conserve and restore wetlands, protect groundwater resources and control soil erosion. That work is done on federal, state and private land.

Districts bring people, agencies, utilities and government together to network to solve natural resource issues identified at the local level, he said.

“We’re that conduit that connects all the dots,” he said.

Each district is unique because natural resource issues vary across the U.S. The district board consists of locally elected leaders who volunteer their time. They identify concerns through locally generated consensus and work to address those concerns, he said.

“Our strength is in that locally led initiative,” Van

Dyke said.

Districts empower and equip landowners with information and the resources they need to make decisions and implement best-management practices, he said. They work with millions of landowners and land managers nationwide to provide technical and financial assistance.

“We solve major resource concerns through this process,” he said.

NACD believes in voluntary, incentive-based conservation with people agreeing on what needs to be done to better their community. Without conservation districts, much of the conservation taking place today wouldn’t happen, he said.

Mandatory federal policy isn’t going to accomplish as much as the voluntary efforts led by districts that believe in what they’re doing and want to make things better for the community, he said, adding

that checking a regulatory box doesn’t get to what caused the issue or how to keep it from happening again.

With the districts’ coordination, everyone has “skin in the game,” Van Dyke said.

Partners, priorities

Districts are a government body with elected supervisors who lead conservation efforts at the county level, Steve Schuyler, NRCS district conservationist for Twin Falls County, said.

The supervisors tell NRCS what the concerns are and to prioritize them, he said.

“Everything we do meets the priorities set up for us for our district,” he said.

In Twin Falls County, for example, the goals include sage grouse conservation, improving water quality, managing livestock waste, stream bank restoration, soil health and weed management, he said.

1970 — Congress passes the National Environmental Policy Act; requires agencies to evaluate and report on environmental impacts of their activities.

1972 — Congress passes the Federal Water Pollution Control Act amendments; makes water quality and non-point source pollution major areas of concern.

1977 — Congress passes the Clean Water Act, heightening protection for wetlands, and the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act requiring USDA to monitor soil and water resources on non-federal lands.



1985 — The Food Security Act makes conservation a prerequisite for participation in USDA programs and establishes the Conservation Reserve Program.

1994 — Congress renames SCS the Natural Resources Conservation Service; NRCS assumes management of the Wetland Reserve Program.

1996 — Congress creates the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, giving NRCS the leadership role for conservation programs.

2005 — NRCS prioritizes nutrient management plans; reducing non-point source pollution, air emissions and erosion control; promoting habitat conservation.

Source: USDA NRCS
Photos courtesy USDA NRCS

rigation water in an area where well levels were dropping.

“A lot of these projects would not get done without our district’s help,” Schuyler said.

Not only do the districts set priorities, they also provide funding for conservation projects, he said.

Nationwide, NRCS funding for conservation programs totaled more than \$4.8 billion in 2017. Funding at the local level varies from year to year, depending on participation in NRCS programs.

Revenue for the Twin Falls conservation district in 2017 included \$20,000 in federal funding, \$21,281 in state funding and \$8,281 in county funding for a total of \$49,531. But grants from several sources, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, provides additional funding for conservation projects.

Twin Falls County is home to three conservation districts — Twin Falls, Balanced Rock and Snake River. Combined, the districts received about \$1.02 million in federal and state grants in 2017. With co-operators contributing another \$774,000, about \$1.8 million was spent on conservation grant projects in the county.

Conservation priorities have changed over the decades, and they will continue to change as a growing population puts more pressure on natural resources, Schuyler said.

“There will always be concerns about natural resources and how to preserve and protect them. The role of the districts will continue to be relevant, and maybe even more so, going forward,” Schuyler said.

But they also face the threat of lack of participation as farms get larger and more demands are placed on producers’ time, he said.

“I hope they don’t go the way of the Grange,” he said.

Beyond the farm

Conservation districts have a unique role in communities, Bill Bitzenberg, chairman of the Twin Falls Soil and Water Conservation District, said.

“Districts are where the rubber meets the road. We are the link between quality of life and the community,” he said.

No one else is going to make suggestions and provide farmers and ranchers with assistance to improve things for the benefit of local communities. Districts link those private landowners with agencies to accomplish things that matter to the community, he said.

They help farmers and ranchers conserve water, improve water and air quality, reduce wind and water erosion, reduce wildfires, improve wildlife habitat and conserve species.

Roughly one-quarter of Oregon land is in agricultural production

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a long way toward ensuring the land can be kept in farming, and can also be a contributor to the ecosystem and conservation values.”

Roughly one-quarter of all land in Oregon — 16.3 million acres — is in agricultural production. Over the next 20 years, 10.5 million of those acres will change ownership as the average age of farmers across the state rose to 60 in 2012.

Despite this trend, researchers estimate that most Oregon farms and ranches do not have a succession plan in place, and 84 percent are sole proprietorships. That leaves them vulnerable to being bought and converted to non-farm uses, such as subdivisions, vacation homes and industrial development.

In turn, McAdams said environmental goals become harder to achieve without having larger blocks of open space kept in agricultural production.

“The commission has discussed at great lengths how preventing fragmentation and preventing non-farm uses on

farmland can lead to conservation outcomes,” McAdams said.

The Agricultural Heritage Program is intended to complement Oregon’s existing land use planning laws. McAdams said Oregon has lost 500,000 acres from agricultural production and 65,500 acres from Exclusive Farm Use zoning even since the state land use program was adopted in 1974.

Members of the Agricultural Heritage Commission represent a range of interests, from farm production to natural resources and wildlife. The group met seven times since Feb. 1 to write rules for the program, most recently on June 25 at Cascade Locks.

Public hearings are scheduled for 1-4 p.m. July 16 at the Department of State Lands building in Salem, and 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. July 17 at the Harney County Community Center in Burns.

Meta Loftsgaarden, OWEB executive director, said she was impressed at how much the commission was able to accomplish in a short period of time.

Perdue: Work is underway on bilateral deals with Japan, India

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Canada and Australia are only too happy to take over Washington’s big wheat market in Japan, he said.

Squires said he’s concerned about the U.S. dropping out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement and asked Perdue what, if any, bilateral agreements the administration is working on.

Perdue said he hasn’t given up on TPP, that the president has said he may look at TPP again but prefers bilateral agreements. Perdue said work is underway on bilateral deals with Japan and India, and that India has been difficult in a lot of ways.

Michelle Hennings, executive director of the Washington Association of Wheat Growers, and Matt Harris, assistant executive director of the Washington State Potato Commission, also voiced concerns about trade.

Perdue said he knows there’s a lot of anxiety that Canada, Mexico and China are the three top trading partners and that all are engaged in U.S. trade disputes.

“I think the president rightly called out China for its bad acts and thefts of intellectual property, even agricultural products like reverse engineering genetics in corn seed,” he said. “Most farmers



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

U.S. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., and U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue met with agricultural and forestry leaders in Spokane July 2.

applaud him for that.”

U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer has told him, he said, that Mexico should fall quickly into place on North American Free Trade Agreement revisions as soon as that nation’s election is over. Leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador won the election over the weekend.

“Both Mexico and the U.S. understand the relationship needs to work out. We’ve benefited from NAFTA and Mexico certainly has,” Perdue said. “I hope we can get Mexico done quickly and then Canada will follow. Public comments are not always what happens in private.”

McMorris Rodgers said she’s joined Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., in asking for a doubling of federal Market Access Program funding to aid export promotions.

She also said House leadership will keep its commitment to Newhouse and others to bring up a standalone ag labor bill for a vote before the August recess. It will address E-verify (electronic verification of employment eligibility), transitioning illegals in the domestic workforce and a more workable guestworker program, she said.

Chris Voigt, executive director of the state Potato Commission, said an Obama administration rule required two under-served vegetables,

such as kale and spinach, be served before potatoes could be served in the USDA school breakfast program. Schools stopped serving vegetables but there’s legislation pending to encourage USDA to change the rule, Voigt said.

“I don’t need any encouragement to do that. This is the first I’ve heard of that. We will check on that and get that kind of silliness out of our regulations,” Perdue replied.

State Sen. Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville and a wheat farmer, said Conservation Reserve Program priorities need more consistency and greater flexibility for grazing. The program requires sagebrush be preserved one year and torn out the next, he said. Perdue replied environmental restrictions from other agencies may come into play.

Duane Vaagen, owner of Vaagen Brothers Lumber, spoke about a proposal for a private program to thin national forests. Mark Benson, vice president of PotlatchDeltic Corp., one of the nation’s largest lumber producers, thanked Perdue for Trump administration regulatory relief and said he’s happy the Timber Investment Act is in the House and Senate versions of the Farm Bill.