

Congratulations for your interest in being a Conservation District Supervisor. We'd like to welcome you to the first of many training modules developed by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) Conservation Districts Bureau (CDB). Our goal is to provide basic training modules that can be viewed at board meetings, specific meetings, or at your home.

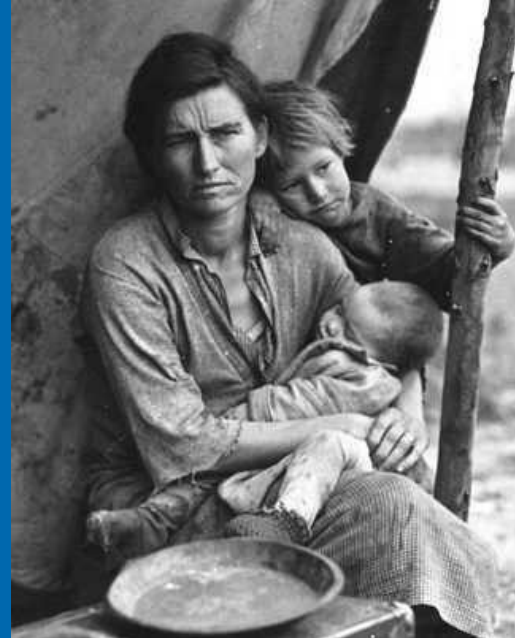
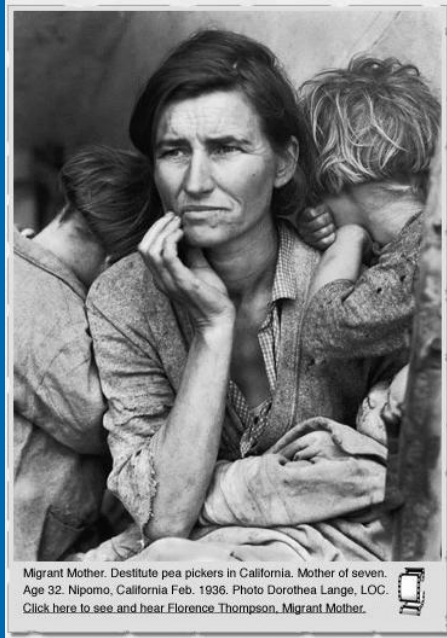
This CD Training module is on the History of Conservation Districts

In this Module, you'll learn a little more on the history of Conservation Districts and the chain of events that lead up to creation of CD's nation wide and in Montana.

History of Conservation Districts

In the early 1930s, along with the greatest depression this nation ever experienced, came an equally unparalleled ecological disaster known as the Dust Bowl. Following a severe and sustained drought in the Great Plains, the region's soil began to erode and blow away, creating huge black dust storms that blotted out the sun and swallowed the countryside. Thousands of “dust refugees” left the black fog to seek better lives.



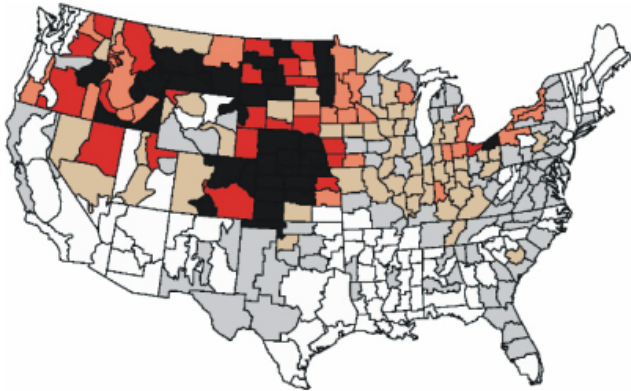


One of the most haunting images to come out of the dark days of the dust bowl and great depression is this photograph by Dorothea Lange. She was commissioned by the Farm Security Administration to chronicle the plight of the displaced farmers during the dust bowl. Dorothea found this migrant mother on the road in 1936. The mother's eyes tell the viewer all he/she needs to know. The expression of fear and hopelessness are reflected in her eyes as she appears to be looking down the road to a very uncertain future. This photograph became an American icon of the dust bowl days and brought an awareness of the struggles of the "Okies" by putting a human face on this tragedy. *** An estimated 210,000 emigrants came to California during the dust bowl, many of whom were forced to return home after failing to locate employment in the Golden State. Only approximately 16,000 remained.

Palmer Drought Severity Index

1930–1939

Percent of time in severe and extreme drought



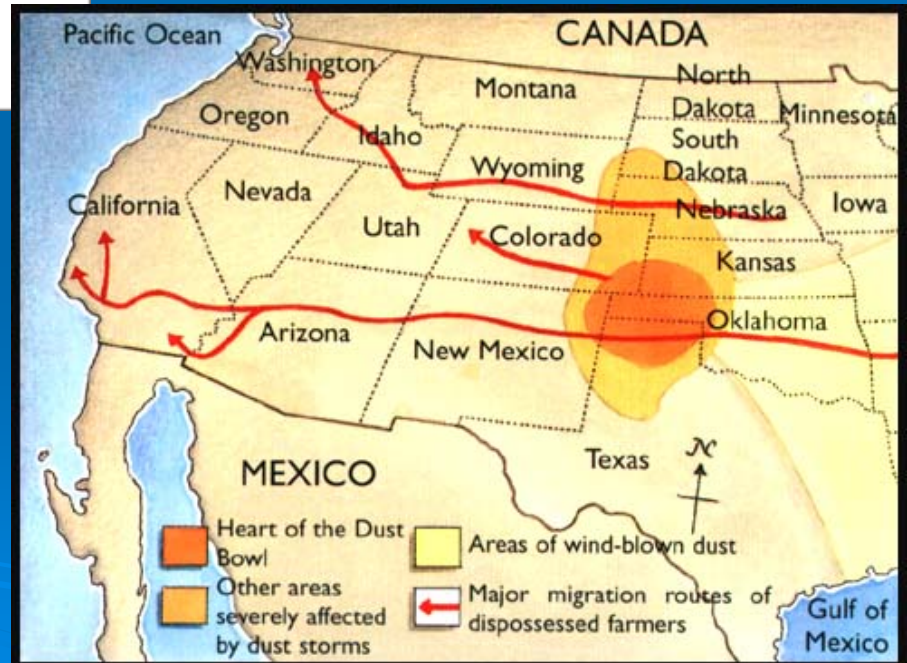
% of time PDSI \leq -3

- Less than 10%
- 10% to 19.99%
- 20% to 29.99%
- 30% to 39.99%
- 40% to 49.99%
- 50% or greater

SOURCE: McKee et al. (1993); NOAA (1990); High Plains Regional Climate Center (1996) Albers Equal Area Projection; Map prepared at the National Drought Mitigation Center

Montana was also in a severe drought during the dust bowl days (1930's).

Many farmers moved west during this time frame we know as the great depression.



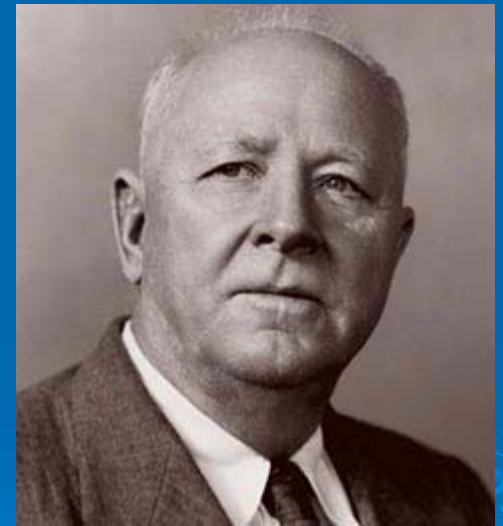


"Cyclonic winds traveling at speeds up to 100 miles per hour rolled out of the Dakotas and traveled quickly across Nebraska, Kansas, eastern Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico. Dirt clouds churned 20,000 feet into the air and created a thousand-mile-wide duster."



But the storms stretched across the nation. They reached south to Texas and east to New York. Dust even sifted into the White House and onto the desk of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1934, just as the first national survey of soil erosion was being completed, wind storms hit the drought-stricken Great Plains and the term “dust bowl” was born.

Hugh Hammond Bennett (April 15, 1881–July 7, 1960), the “Father of Soil Conservation” in the United States and first Chief of the Soil Conservation Service, joined Bureau of Soils in 1903 as a soil surveyor. On Capitol Hill, while testifying about the erosion problem, Bennett threw back the curtains to reveal a sky blackened by dust.

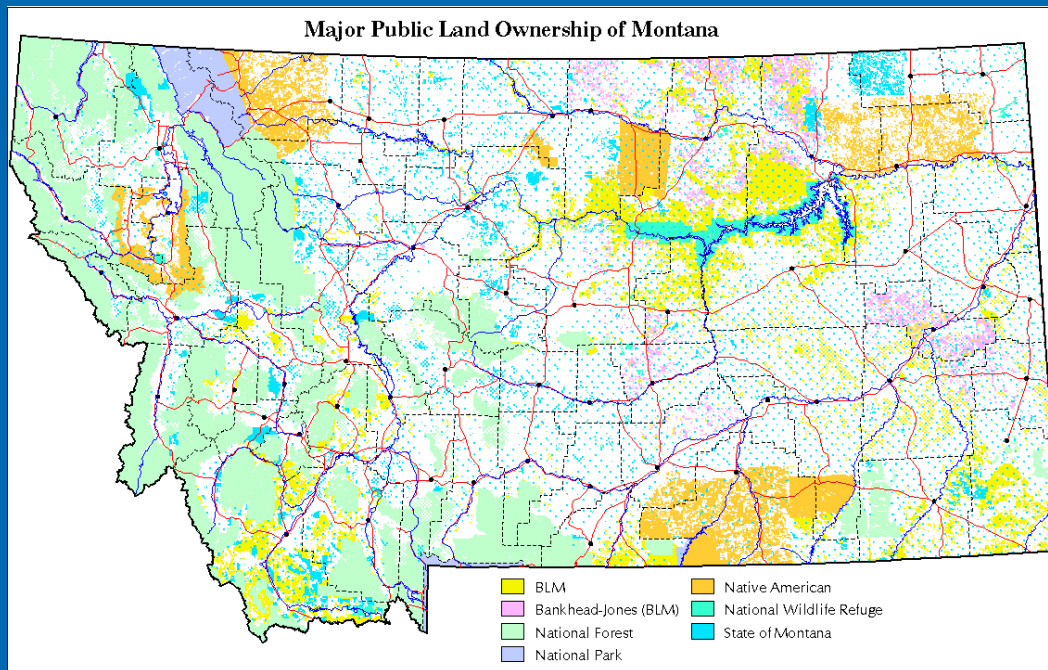


On May 12, 1934, a major storm hit the plains, later to be described by Bennett as a turning point in the battle to get public attention to the erosion problem:



“This particular dust storm blotted out the sun over the nation’s capital, drove grit between the teeth of New Yorkers, and scattered dust on the decks of ships 200 miles out to sea..... Although we were slowly coming to realize that soil erosion was a major national problem, even before that great dust storm, it took that storm to awaken the nation as a whole to some realization of the menace of erosion.”

Congress unanimously passed legislation declaring soil and water conservation a national policy and priority as evidenced by the passage of the Soil Conservation Act of April 27, 1935.



- Three-fourths of the continental United States is privately owned, and 59% in Montana.
- Congress realized that only active, voluntary support from landowners would guarantee the success of conservation work on private land.
- 1937, President Roosevelt wrote the governors of all the states recommending legislation that would allow local landowners to form soil conservation districts.



CD's become reality in Montana

The movement caught on across the country with district-enabling legislation passed in every state.

Montana passed legislation, Montana Conservation District law (Section 76-15-101, MCA) in 1939.

Wibaux CD & Sheridan CD were the first in Montana, officially organizing on January 15, 1940.

Today, there are 58 conservation districts across the Big Sky State.



History of CD's in review:

1. What major event lead to the creation of CD's?
2. What act did Congress pass in 1935 addressing soil and water conservation?
3. What year was the Montana Conservation District Law passed?
4. Today there are how many CD's in Montana?