



Dust bowl area gets government aid and a plan to halt future disasters

A new generation of "Okies" may be forced to pack up and leave the dusty, drought-ridden southern Great Plains. The present 17 million-acre dust bowl covers a wider area than did its famous predecessor of 20 years ago.

The Government has stepped in to aid state and local agencies in the distressed areas. President Eisenhower has allocated \$10 million in federal relief funds, and \$5 million more is coming from Congress. The assistance will be administered by the Agriculture Department.

USDA, through the Soil Conservation Service, also has announced a new conservation program for the Great Plains area. The program embraces both temporary emergency aid and long range soil, water, and plant conservation plans. Research and education will bolster both phases of the program, it is believed.

The 1954 drought is the fourth major dry spell the region has experienced since it was settled by farmers about 1880. The three previous droughts all caused a disruption of the area's production, but only two (1890-95 and 1933-38) could be considered as real disasters. Both depopulated certain sections.

But after each drought came a period of lush rainfall which helped to erase some of the scars from the tired land. With the rains came new settlers, many of whom had never experienced a severe drought. These wet periods encouraged farmers and ranchers, especially the newcomers, to plant larger and larger crops. Soon they were practicing the same kinds of farming that helped bring about the previous droughts.

War and its demands for wheat and cotton contributed to the breakdown of the land. Soaring prices brought speculators and "suitcase" farmers to the area. These agricultural carpetbaggers proceeded to grow crops on poor land

with no thought to proper soil management.

For several years, favorable weather and high yields combined with high prices brought rich returns to farmers in the area. More sod land was plowed up for cash crops and land prices steadily climbed. From 1939 to 1949, wheat acreage in the area increased by about 6.5 million acres. One county in Colorado during this period had a 50-fold increase in wheat acreage.

In 1950, however, the trend turned again toward dryness. Below normal rainfall was the rule in most sections in 1951 and 1952. Severe windstorms came along in 1953 to add to the erosion damage. Many farms began to "blow," scattering their topsoil to the winds.

Less than one inch of rain fell in most sections from Jan. 1 to April 10 of this year. In February, one of the most severe windstorms ever recorded hit the area, causing soil blowing to spread to nearly all fields that were not protected by good cover crops. Scattered showers in the past month have helped the situation somewhat.

The SCS Conservation Program

In the thirties, the Soil Conservation Service, with the aid of land grant colleges and other cooperating agencies, devised a soil and water conservation program for the drought area. This program, SCS believes, is still technically sound. With a few modifications to

meet changing technology, the same plan is being advocated today.

The big differences between the original program and the new one are not in methods, but in speed and degree of application. Another major factor perhaps will be penalties to discourage farmers from raising crops on poor land.

The temporary portion of the program involves emergency tillage and establishing new cover on blowing fields. Tillage can provide only very temporary relief, SCS points out, and should be used only as a preliminary step to establishing emergency cover. Cover crops, such as sorghums and millet, are recommended. If enough rain does not fall to enable the crops to be planted, SCS recommends providing land protection through the use of the natural weed crop.

Acreage allotments, price support, and crop insurance programs should not limit the planting of emergency cover crops, SCS says. Financial assistance should be made available with the possible condition that the land be used wisely in the future.

These and other proposals for the temporary program usually fit a niche in the long range program. The object of the latter program is to get the farmer to use land within its capabilities and to protect and improve it. The program also calls for conversion of about 9 million acres of cropland into permanent grassland because it is not good enough to be cultivated.

Some of the government's present farm programs, designed for well established farm areas, will have to be revised to fit the needs of the southern Great Plains. These changes are needed to encourage improved land use and better cropping systems.

Research will be intensified as a major part of the program. SCS will seek fertility and conservation practices that will make maximum use of the limited amount of moisture available in the area. Other studies will measure the effect of various crops on the physical and chemical properties of soil. There also will be further research on the capabilities of the soil itself.

Agriculture Secretary Ezra Taft Benson says the present drought emphasizes the need for changes in land use in the area. The SCS program should be a great help to farmers in making these changes.

Land Damage in Drought Area

State	ALREADY DAMAGED (in acres)		LIABLE TO BE DAMAGED (in acres)	
	Cropland	Range Land	Cropland	Range Land
Kansas	3,080,000	960,000	3,550,000	890,000
Colorado	3,250,000	960,000	1,250,000	860,000
Texas	3,290,000	1,770,000	2,380,000	3,650,000
New Mexico	1,270,000	1,500,000	870,000	1,250,000
Oklahoma	660,000	20,000	120,000	10,000
TOTAL	11,550,000	5,210,000	8,170,000	6,660,000