

A Chronological History of the Soil Conservation Service and Related Events

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A great impetus was given to the conservation movement in this country when the Federal Soil Conservation Service was created in 1935. Prior to this time an action program had been started and prior to that the first erosion experiment stations were established. These experiment stations were established in 1929 and the action programs were started in 1930. Many people feel that this marks the beginning of the conservation program in this country. Those holding to this belief are correct inasmuch as the federally sponsored programs are concerned. In fact, it was not until the early 1930's that conservation of natural resources began to receive national and international attention.

If we look farther back into history we find that a number of our forefathers were conservationists in the strictest sense of the word. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and many others not only believed in conservation but practiced it on their holdings. Jefferson is given credit for saying, "He is the greatest patriot who stops the most gullies." George Washington is given credit for being the father of his country by everyone. By many he is credited with being the father of conservation also. Washington practiced conservation at Mount Vernon and spoke and wrote with authority on the subject. During this period of the beginning of our national life the number of conservationists was small as compared with the present time. Those who practiced and spoke out for conservation of natural resources were decidedly in the minority. Many of our forefathers felt a greater urge to plow up the grasslands and clear the forests than to conserve these resources.

If we should look farther back into ancient history, the records reveal evidences of conservation but at the same time much evidence of soil destruction. The ruins of Greece, China and other older civilizations are mute reminders of man's failure to conserve soil and water. The Bible gives certain references to God's admonition to both use and conserve. Many feel that the instruction to rest 1/7th of the time was meant to apply to the land as well as to the people.

Considerable favorable reaction to the need for a national conservation program came out of President Theodore Roosevelt's Conservation Conference which was held in 1907. Here the governors of the states went on record endorsing the need for a national conservation program.

In Indiana, especially within the southern part of the state, some attention was given to the application of the conservation practices prior to 1920. The principal practice recommended and used was terracing. Demonstrations of terrace construction were held by a few county agents assisted by the Agricultural Engineering Department of

Purdue University. In 1919 the late Prof. M. L. Fisher published the Purdue Experiment Station Circular No. 90 entitled "Washing Lands of Indiana—A Preliminary Study." In this publication, Professor Fisher emphasized the seriousness of water erosion in Southern Indiana and enumerated several corrective measures. This circular was profusely illustrated with photographs of eroded areas. In fact, the cuts were numerous and showed the most serious conditions. Professor Fisher recommended terracing, strip cropping, a greater use of cover, pasture improvement and many of the practices which we use and recommend today.

It is the purpose of this paper, however, to relate the developments in the creation and functioning of the Federal Soil Conservation Service from its beginning as the Soil Erosion Service to the present. The Soil Erosion Service was established as a temporary organization in the U. S. Department of Interior without formal order. A resolution was passed by a special Board of Public Works and an allotment of five million dollars was made to the Department of Interior for soil erosion prevention work on public and privately owned lands on July 17, 1933.

Recognition of the menace of soil erosion to the nation's agriculture was recognized when in 1929 the Buchanan Amendment to the Agricultural Appropriation Bill for the fiscal year 1930 was adopted. This amount provided \$160,000 to be used by the Secretary of Agriculture for soil erosion investigations. This same year soil erosion experiment stations were set up under the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils in cooperation with the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering. A portion of the funds were assigned to the Forest Service to supplement what this service was doing in the study of the influence of forest cover on runoff. These appropriations were continued to the Department of Agriculture after the transfer of the Soil Erosion Service from the Department of Interior was made.

On September 19, 1933, the actual operation of the Soil Erosion Service began. Dr. Hugh H. Bennett was transferred from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of Interior to act as director of the new agency. Dr. Bennett was the only employee of this Service on that date. On the following day, Lillian Wieland entered on duty as Dr. Bennett's secretary. From this beginning the Service grew rapidly and many employees were added during the next several years. On October 8, 1933, Dr. Bennett prescribed the organization of the Soil Erosion Service and stated its functions and plan of operation. The first soil erosion control project was established on October 10 on the Coon Creek Project in Coon Valley, Wisconsin with headquarters at LaCrosse, Wisconsin. A few days later, Dr. Walter C. Lowdermilk entered the Service as its vice director.

By April 1, 1934, 22 Emergency Conservation Work Camps were assigned to and began operation under the technical direction of the Soil Erosion Service. Some Civil Works Administration and ECW labor had been utilized by other agencies prior to this time.

May 11, 1934 is a historic event in conservation annals. It was on this date that a great catastrophe occurred in the region of the

Great Plains which resulted in focusing nationwide attention on the need for more conservation effort. The catastrophe referred to was the great dust bowl which started with the nation's first great dust storm. This storm blew fine soil particles from the Great Plains to Washington, D. C., and as much as 300 miles out into the Atlantic Ocean.

In order to secure more information concerning the menace of soil erosion nationally and to provide maps which could be used immediately, a nation-wide reconnaissance survey was begun on August 15, 1934. This survey was completed in two months. On March 6, 1935, the second great dust storm occurred. Again great clouds of topsoil from the fields of Kansas, Colorado, Texas and Oklahoma swept over Washington and the states of the eastern seaboard and out to sea.

Soon after this it became apparent that the Soil Erosion Service more properly belonged in the Department of Agriculture. By order of the Federal Emergency Administrator of Public Works, on March 23, 1935 the Soil Erosion Service was transferred from the Department of Interior to the Department of Agriculture. This transfer was approved by the president on March 25. The transfer included all funds, personnel and property. At this time there were in operation 39 erosion control projects and 51 Emergency Conservation Work Erosion Camps. Those ECW camps assigned to the Forest Service for the purpose of doing forestry erosion work on public lands were transferred from the Forest Service to the Soil Erosion Service. Additional camps were also added.

The Secretary of Agriculture in the spring of 1935 realized the need for greater unification of activities pertaining to the control of soil erosion within the department and issued a memorandum by which this was partially brought about. This memorandum set out the fact that the Soil Erosion Service would operate as a separate unit of the department but that it would also include the soil erosion investigational work and the service and control work of the department. The ten experiment stations which were transferred in this memorandum were located at Guthrie, Oklahoma; Temple, Texas; Hays, Kansas; Tyler, Texas; Bethany, Missouri; Statesville, North Carolina; Pullman, Washington; Clarinda, Iowa; LaCrosse, Wisconsin and Zanesville, Ohio. A number of erosion control nurseries were also transferred in this order.

On April 27, 1935, Public 46 of the 74th Congress, creating the Soil Conservation Service was passed. This act directed the Secretary of Agriculture to establish an agency to be known as the Soil Conservation Service. On this same day, the Secretary issued a departmental memorandum establishing the Service within the Department of Agriculture and providing that this new agency include the activities conducted under the Soil Erosion Service. It further designated Dr. H. H. Bennett, Chief of the Soil Conservation Service and W. C. Lowdermilk, Associate Chief. From September through December, regional offices were established in each of 11 regions. A regional conservator was placed in charge of each regional office. On December 27, 10,325 employees of the Soil Conservation Service acquired classified civil service status. By

the end of 1935, the Service was operating 498 ECW camps, otherwise referred to as CCC Camps.

In the summer of 1935 the first Demonstrational Project in Indiana was established. It was known as Leatherwood Creek Watershed Project in Lawrence County. The Project offices were located in Bedford. On this area, all of which drained into Leatherwood Creek, farms were planned for conservation and numerous conservation practices were established on them. These practices included terracing, contour farming, strip cropping, woodland and pasture management, tree planting and many others.

WPA labor was furnished to set trees, move fences and build erosion control structures. Lime, seed, trees, fencing and other materials were furnished to encourage farmers to cooperate in the program.

In the next three years, two similar projects were established. One was in Henry County and the other in Benton County. The number of ECW camps in the State during this period varied from 10 to 14.

On February 29, 1936, Public 461 of the 74th Congress, known as the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, was enacted. This placed in operation the payments of grants-in-aid to farmers for carrying out soil conserving and soil building practices. It amended the August 24, 1935 act which was designated as the Agricultural Adjustment Act. By June, the Flood Control Act was passed which gave certain responsibilities to both the Secretary of War and of Agriculture in the carrying on of a national program of flood control.

In September 1936, the peak employment of WPA labor utilized by SCS was reached.

Up to the end of 1936 no provision had been made for local participation in the administration of federal conservation activities. Programs of conservation planning and the application of conservation practices were being offered to and accepted by farmers throughout the nation by both ECW camps and demonstrational projects. In Indiana, there were in addition to the ten camps administered by the SCS, a number administered by the Park Service, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering. It had become increasingly evident that there should be more local participation in the conservation program to make it more appealing and enduring. Farmers were inclined to accept a complete conservation program for their farm and to agree to carry it out only because they wanted to receive certain work or materials for the establishment of practices in which they were especially interested. After such assistance had been rendered, in all too many cases, they failed to carry out the complete program as developed for them. It was unfortunate, too, that many of these programs were developed for the farmer rather than in cooperation with him. Such weaknesses caused the leader to begin planning for formation of local organizations which would be responsible for directing the conservation program.

On February 27, 1937, the president addressed a letter to the governor of each state urging him to support the passage of state legislation to effectuate the formation of soil conservation districts. With this letter, a standard soil conservation districts law was included.

This standard act was prepared by the Department of Agriculture but at the suggestions of representatives from many of the states. On March 3, the first soil conservation districts law was enacted in Arkansas and approved by its governor. In the legislature of this same year, Indiana's Enabling Act was passed. Our state was one of the first four states to enact this law.

On August 4 of this same year, the Brown Creek Soil Conservation District, the first to be organized in the U. S. was organized in Anson and Union Counties, North Carolina. On the 16th day of January, 1940, a referendum creating the first district in Indiana comprising a part of Vanderburgh County was held. A Certificate of Organization was issued to the Southwestern Indiana District on the 15th of February of the same year. Soon thereafter, the first county-wide district was formed in Knox County, the referendum having been held on the 5th of February and the Certificate of Organization being issued to the Knox County District on April 4. The organization of districts has proceeded from this beginning to the point that there are at the present time, 69 districts covering essentially that many counties of the state organized into districts. District organization is progressing at the present time in 5 other counties. By April 24, 1941, Alabama became the first state to have all of its farm land included within soil conservation districts.

On May 22, 1941 the first CPS Camp, Civilian Public Service Camp, was assigned to the Soil Conservation Service for use. A total of 15 such camps assisted with the program being carried on by the service. This was a part of the program of employing conscientious objectors on work of national importance in lieu of military service. Food, medical care and welfare were provided without cost to the government.

By the beginning of fiscal 1942, the Service was reorganized. In this reorganization, 3 regional offices were abolished. In April 1943 the Service became a part of the War Food Administration. The last of the demonstration projects were closed by June 30, 1944. In 1951 SCS was given responsibility for the technical phases of the permanent type of conservation work done by the Production and Marketing Administration. Dr. Bennett reached retirement age April 15, 1951. His period of service was extended to April 30, 1952 by presidential order.

All regional offices were abolished in 1953. Most of their responsibilities were given to the state offices of the Service. Earlier in this year, the Service was assigned the responsibility of approving areas to serve as pilot watersheds. On such areas, 50 or more of which were established, studies were made of the combined soil conservation and flood control work on small watersheds. One was established in Pike and Dubois Counties, Indiana. These pilot watersheds, serviced and administered by the Soil Conservation Service, were designed to find the best ways and means of flood control and conservation using the entire watershed as a laboratory.

Small watersheds as we have them today are set up under Public Law 566. Several of these projects are in process of being organized within the state at this time. They are sponsored by local soil conservation districts. State approval is given by the Flood Control and

Water Resources Board and federal approval by the Department of Agriculture. In these projects the expense of flood control work is borne by the federal government while the conservation practices are established by the land owners within the watershed. Technical assistance is provided by the Soil Conservation Service. Public Law 566 repealed the Department of Agriculture's authority for flood prevention measures under the Flood Control Act of 1936 except for the programs authorized on 11 major watersheds. None of these watersheds are located within Indiana.

At the present time it may be said that the Soil Conservation Service divides its activities in four ways. Its first responsibility is to furnish technical assistance to legally organized soil conservation districts. More than 2,600 of such organizations have been formed in every state and territory of the nation. Farmers within these legally constituted governmental divisions of state or territory are furnished technical planning and application assistance to establish conservation plans on their lands. A similar type of assistance is furnished within small watersheds which are sponsored in the beginning by the districts and later by watershed organizations. The Service here goes beyond that offered within the districts since materials, structures, etc., for flood control are furnished over and above the application of practices on the lands within the watershed area. Another part of the Service's activity is providing technical assistance to farmers participating in the agricultural conservation program of the ASC. Farmers thus participating receive grants-in-aid as cost sharing. Determination of the need for the practices on which cost sharing is to be paid and the approval of these practices is a responsibility of the Soil Conservation Service. Other responsibilities of the Service are directing the National Soil Survey Program and the Conservation Needs Inventory.

Donald A. Williams is the present administrator of the Soil Conservation Service. He was preceded by the late Robert M. Salter who served as chief from November 13, 1951 to November 1, 1953. Dr. H. H. Bennett was chief from April 27, 1935 to November 12, 1951.

As of June 30, 1955, the Service employed 14,973 persons, 12,492 of which were on competitive employment. At this time there are 2,654 soil conservation districts and 20 other districts being assisted. These contain an approximate land area of 1,484,974,000 acres. The Service is now more than 21 years old. It is of legal age and an established agency in the Department of Agriculture.