



Texas State Soil & Water Conservation Board

News Release

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From the Era of the Dust Bowl to the Present: Commemorating 75 Years of Soil and Water Conservation

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“May 29, 2014 marks the diamond jubilee of the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board (TSSWCB) and the beginning of Texas soil and water conservation districts (SWCDS). The date is also the official kickoff date for many celebratory events around the state throughout the year commemorating the event,” said Rex Isom, executive director of the agency.

The problems of wind and water erosion in the 1930’s (which was the reason for the creation of the TSSWCB and SWCDS in Texas as well as in other states) caused great land devastation in Texas and throughout the Great Plains region of the country. The era was marked by a period of drought from 1931 to 1939 that was coupled with severe wind-driven soil erosion of overgrazed rangeland and soil exposed by the use of farming practices not adapted to the semiarid U.S. Great Plains.

“In addition, this catastrophic display of nature caught public attention at a time when the state and nation was in the throes of a great economic depression. Nature just added additional woes to the suffering of the people because some of the worst dust storms that had ever been seen in the history of the country were occurring at that time,” added Isom.

In his book *The Worst Hard Time*, Timothy Egan notes the horrendous cataclysmic forces of nature which plagued the land and people during the early 1930’s. This era of American and Texas history is better known as the “Dust Bowl.

Egan vividly describes living conditions that existed in that era. “Dust clouds boiled up, ten thousand feet or more in the sky, and rolled like moving mountains and when the dust fell, it penetrated everything: hair, nose, throat, kitchen, bedroom, but the eeriest thing was

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the darkness. (See below picture of rolling dust clouds with building in foreground) People tied themselves to ropes before going to a barn just a few hundred feet away from the house for fear of being lost in the blackness of the swirling dust.(See below picture of lone automobile in front of blackened dust filled sky) Buildings, fences, and farm implements were seen as all but buried under the devastating effects of windblown soils”. (See below picture of farm implements, building buried under effects of a dust storm)

Egan goes on to say that the storms had, “ferocity and density never before seen and they came to be known by many as ‘black blizzards.’”

“So, out of this chaos of nature and economic depression the TSSWCB and SWCDS were born. It should be noted that since the creation of the TSSWCB and organization of local soil and water conservation districts we can proudly say that the majority of Texas farmers, ranchers and timber producers from one generation to the next for the past 75 years have voluntarily and continuously entered into working agreements with their local SWCDS to implement a soil and water conservation program on their farms and ranches to meet the changing conservation needs of every acre on that property,” said Isom.

But the story didn’t begin smoothly. It had a rocky start until all the political kinks were worked out. When the first version of a conservation law for Texas came out the early movers and shakers for such a law found that it lacked stability and convinced then Governor Jimmy Allred to veto the bill which he did in June, 1937. Their reasons for wanting the bill vetoed was because the law would automatically establish soil conservation districts on a county basis, make the county commissioners court the governing body and called for a portion of county taxes to finance the program,” said Isom.

“What they wanted in law was a farmer-rancher controlled program in which local landowners would determine whether a soil conservation district was needed. In addition, they did not want a soil conservation district to have taxing authority or powers of eminent domain. A new bill was written which satisfied their concerns and passed in 1939 by the following legislature. The rest is history,” added Isom.

Today the TSSWCB administers several key state programs that provide technical and financial assistance to landowners and land managers who wish to enter into a

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cooperative agreement with local SWCDS to protect their natural resources. In addition, the success of local voluntary conservation programs involves partnerships. Though the name has changed a few times over the years, a key partner working with the TSSWCB and local SWCDS is the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. NRCS employs people in numerous occupational disciplines including soil conservationists, rangeland management specialists, soil scientists, agronomists, biologists, engineers, geologists, engineers, and foresters. Some federal conservation financial assistance programs, enable these experts to help landowners and land managers develop conservation plans for crop, range, and timberlands.

“Conservation practices implemented on private agricultural lands benefit all citizens because implemented conservation practices not only protect and improve soil resources, but insure a sustainable agriculture from which come food products and the raw commodities which drive all aspects of the economy. In addition, conservation practices improve water quality, and in some cases, enhance water quantity, but public benefits don’t end there. Implemented conservation practices also contribute to cleaner air, improved wildlife habitat, improved rangeland as well as being a factor to healthy and viable rural and urban communities,” Isom noted.

“The only reason the TSSWCB still exists 75 years after its establishment is because of the state’s soil and water conservation districts, and they in turn exist because of the state’s farmers and ranchers who come to local SWCDS for help in planning and implementing conservation programs on private lands. This diamond jubilee then is a celebration of a success story that has worked across the state and across generations because it is based on local control by those closest to the issues,” said Isom.

Isom’s words certainly reflect the philosophy of V.C Marshall, considered the “father of the conservation district program in Texas” who is attributed with saying, “The soil conservation district is the workshop through which those who love the and pool their efforts and information in making land more stable and productive and our country more prosperous, more attractive and a better land in which to live. The fact that landowners themselves have the responsibility for petitioning for and voting in a district, formulating its

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program and work plan, administering its business and entering into cooperative agreements with their fellow landowners and operators, makes soil conservation districts a democracy in action.”

Will the work of the state’s 216 soil and water conservation districts ever be completed, and will the soil and water conservation programs administered by the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board ever be fully achieved? Probably not. Land ownership changes, or family land when passed on through inheritance is cut into smaller pieces of the pie accompanied with varying land management objectives. Then too, an ever changing political environment coupled with ever changing climatic conditions and agricultural technological advancements all impact existing and future soil and water conservation programs and practices that are implemented on the land.

The late Raymond F. Dasmann, professor emeritus of ecology at University of California, Santa Cruz added additional insight as to why conservation of natural resources is a perpetual process. He said, “Most conservation problems exist on particular pieces of ground occupied or cared for by a particular group of people. Attempts to solve them at a global, or even a national level, often strike far from the mark.”

Thus the words of the founding father of the Texas Soil and Water Conservation District Program” rings even truer.... “The fact that landowners themselves have the responsibility for organizing a local SWCD, formulating its program and plan of work, administering its business and entering into cooperative agreements with their fellow landowners and operators, makes soil conservation districts a democracy in action.”

The Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board (TSSWCB) administers Texas’ soil and water conservation law and delivers coordinated natural resource conservation programs through the State’s 216 soil and water conservation districts.

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Additionally, the TSSWCB is the lead agency for planning, implementing, and managing programs for preventing and abating agricultural and silvicultural nonpoint sources of water pollution. The agency also administers a water supply enhancement program through the targeted control of water-depleting brush.

The TSSWCB, in an additional area of responsibility, acts to ensure that the State's network of 2,000 flood control dams are protecting lives and property by providing operation, maintenance, and structural repair grants to local government sponsors. The agency also facilitates the Texas Invasive Species Coordinating Committee.

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