

HISTORY OF THE LOUISIANA CONSERVATION PROGRAM

The Louisiana Conservation Program first began in the 1930's when Louisiana farmers became increasingly aware of the severe water erosion problems on their farmlands. This was the same period referred to as the "Dust Bowl" days when windblown topsoil drifted from the western great plains across eastern United States to Washington, D.C., and beyond. This soil erosion crisis resulted in a continuing crusade by Hugh Hammond Bennett, today referred to as the father of conservation, to convince the U.S. Congress of the need for a government conservation agency with federal funding. A North Carolina native, Bennett joined the USDA Bureau of Soils in 1903; within 4 years, the bureau began publishing the first soil surveys. In his years making surveys, Bennett came to realize the dramatic toll soil erosion was taking on the country's farm land and the subsequent impairments to the nation's security if left unchecked. His writings in the USDA bulletin *Soil Erosion: A National Menace* helped convince Congress to authorize a series of soil erosion experiment stations in 1929.

Thanks also to Bennett's efforts Congress included a clause in the National Industrial Recovery Act of June 16, 1933 to allow erosion control work within the emergency employment programs during the Great Depression. This provision led to the development of the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC). Bennett continued to argue that conservation across the landscape would require many diverse measures such as contouring, strip cropping, crop rotations, pasture improvement and management, reforestation and wildlife habitat enhancement. Again Bennett's arguments were persuasive and in 1933 resulted in the development of the Soil Erosion Service within the US Department of the Interior (USDI). With funds provided to employ the CCC, Bennett began planning conservation demonstration projects on farms within selected watersheds, usually near the established experiment stations. With project staff including varied specialists such as agronomists, soil scientists, engineers, foresters, wildlife biologists, social scientists and others, and men from the CCC doing much of the work, farms were modified to include conservation practices according to every crop and land use. The concept of conservation planning as we know it was born.

With this work becoming more visible and gaining popularity, Bennett and others sought increased funding and legislative stability for the new conservation program. The Congressional hearing was a timelessly memorable one. As was common in the mid-1930s, a spring dust storm from the Dust Bowl region swept up into the atmosphere and was carried out to the eastern seaboard where, during Bennett's testimony, dust began to settle onto Senate Office Building furniture, helping to convince Congress of the validity of his arguments. Consequently in 1935, Congress approved Public Law 46, changing the name of the service from the SES to the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and moving the agency from the USDI into the USDA (In 1994 the SCS would be renamed the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or "NRCS"). Although this was a promising start to the conservation movement, many recognized that conservation needed to spread beyond the scattered demonstration projects and out to the rest of the country. To this end, the Under Secretary of Agriculture M.L. Wilson and USDA attorney Philip Glick drafted the concept of a new unit of government, the conservation district. The "district" would be organized under State, not Federal law and most of each district's supervisors would be elected by landowners living within the districts boundaries. Thus the conservation

districts would provide a mechanism for spreading conservation across the nation. Also, with local groups planning and setting priorities, and the federal government contributing with financial and technical assistance, the reluctance of many farmers to accept aid from the federal government was overcome. The arrangement allowed for federal assistance toward conservation without complete federal control. With this design the USDA prepared a Standard Conservation District Act for the States to consider.

In discussing the conservation district "standard act," Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace wrote in 1936, "The nation that destroys its soil destroys itself. The soil is indispensable. Heedless wastage of the wealth which nature has stored in the soil cannot long continue without the effects being felt by every member of the society.... Wind and water are seldom harmful when the natural environment is undisturbed. But, when soil resources are used unwisely, wind and water write a tragic story in dust storms and in muddy rivers that carry the good soil into the ocean." These thoughts are as applicable today as in 1936.

As a result, in 1938 the Louisiana Legislature passed enabling legislation, Act No. 370 which established the State Soil and Water Conservation Committee and authorized it to assist local farmers to petition and establish conservation districts. In 1938, the Feliciana Soil & Water Conservation District was the first Louisiana district organized, encompassing East and West Feliciana and parts of East Baton Rouge and St. Helena Parishes. Within a year twelve Soil and Water Conservation Districts were formed.

An additional 30 conservation districts were formed primarily on Parish boundaries over the next several years. In 1984 Plaquemines Parish was the final area of the state organized into a district. Over the years many of the original larger districts were divided into smaller districts, thus the most recent division creating the newest district in 2003, Jefferson Davis, with a total of 44 Louisiana conservation districts.