Appendix D

THE NATIONAL GRASSLANDS:
ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT
IN THE DUST BOWL

On 20 June 1960, the U.S. Department of Agriculture created nineteen National Grasslands from twenty-two land utilization projects in eleven western states. These National Grasslands included four which were located in the most severely wind-eroded area of the Great Plains known as the Dust Bowl (see fig. 1). At that time the Mills project in New Mexico, the Morton County project in Kansas, the Cimarron project in Oklahoma, the Dallam County project in Texas, and the Southeastern and Southern Otero projects in Colorado became respectively the Kiowa, Cimarron, Rita Blanca, and Comanche National Grasslands. Each land utilization project had been part of the Roosevelt Administration’s national soil conservation program during the 1930s—a program that was specifically designed to restore severely eroded lands such as those found in the Dust Bowl. There, drought, crop failure, overgrazing, soil structure, and the prevailing winds had contributed to the most serious wind erosion problem in the nation by 1932.1

As wind erosion increased on the Great Plains during the early 1930s, the interests of the social scientists who championed the need to remove submarginal lands from cultivation, also intensified. If the most severely eroded lands could be removed from cultivation and restored to grass and the blowing rangeland reseeded, New Dealers argued, the soil could be stabilized, the dust storms ended, and the land returned to a grazing economy with the federal government dictating the best conservation practices. The development of the land utilization projects in the Dust Bowl would be the supreme test of the federal government to

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achieve those goals in the Great Plains where soil erosion had become a major economic and social problem.

Plans to remove submarginal farmlands from cultivation, however, did not begin with the dust storms. Since the early 1920s, social scientists had been studying land utilization in relation to productivity and soil conservation. In 1929 the Agricultural Marketing Act enabled the Federal Farm Board to analyze the suitability of removing marginal lands from cultivation. Two years later, delegates from land-grant colleges, federal agencies, and farm organizations met at the National Conference on Land Utilization in Chicago where they urged the federal purchase of submarginal lands. That conference led to the organization of the National Land Use Planning Committee in 1932. This committee studied land-use problems and also recommended the federal acquisition of submarginal farmland to remove it from cultivation. Early in 1933, President Herbert Hoover, in support of the committee's recommendations, sought Congressional approval for a plan that would enable the federal government to lease submarginal land thereby removing it from productivity. The work of the National Land Use Planning Committee continued with the creation of the National Resources Board on 1 June 1934. Soon thereafter, the Land Planning Committee of the National Resources Board completed a study of the nation's land and water resources and issued a report outlining land-use policies that would be in the best interests of the general public. Specifically, that report called for the federal government to formulate a long-term land-use policy that would provide for the acquisition and removal of as much as 75,000,000 acres from cultivation nationwide.

Thus, by the time the dust began to blow severely, agricultural experts, social scientists, and government officials had developed a "Land Program" which sought to achieve economic adjustments through public ownership to deal with the "agricultural maladjustments" of severely eroded lands. This land utilization policy would provide an "agricultural phase" to supplement the "engineering phase" of the federal land reclamation program. Together with New Deal zeal, it also would provide the basis for a grand soil conservation experiment in the Dust Bowl. Indeed, New Dealers believed the time was right for the federal government to use public funds to purchase submarginal lands. Most importantly, however, New Deal social scientists based the development and implementation of land-use policy on the belief that the needs of society were superior to those of the individual. As a result, society, represented by the federal government, had an obligation to assist farmers to use their lands wisely for the benefit of all. The farmer then, did not have absolute ownership of his property. Rather, he shared it with society that was obligated to oversee its use to guarantee future generations the inheritance of fertile fields rather than eroded hillsides and dust-laden air. To exercise that responsibility, however, the government had the obligation of providing guidelines for the proper use of the soil, and if need be, it could use its coercive power to insure that those regulations would be observed.

More tangible rather than theoretical development of the land-use program began on 28 December 1933, when the Public Works Administration (PWA) transferred twenty-five million dollars to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) for the purchase of submarginal lands. After February 1934, however, primary responsibility for the planning and acquisition of submarginal lands resided with the Land Policy Section of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), although the FERA administered financial and legal matters and handled resettlement under its Division of Rural Rehabilitation. On 1 May 1935, President Roosevelt transferred responsibility for the land utilization program to the Resettlement Administration to streamline administrative responsibility. Under the Resettlement Administration, the Division of Land Utilization assumed responsibility for administering the work which the AAA had begun. Jurisdiction, however, again changed on 1 September 1937, when the newly created Farm Security Administration assumed control of the land utilization projects. That authority lasted until 16 October 1938, when the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) became responsible for administering the land purchase program under Title III of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937. The Soil Conservation Service continued to purchase lands in designated areas through February 1943, when the land purchase program ended except for final acquisitions to block-in an area.


2. L. C. Gray, "Federal Purchase and Administration of Submarginal Land in the Great Plains," Journal of Farm Economics 21 (February 1939): 126. Gray, "Social and Economic Implications," 263–264; Kirkendall, Social Scientists and Farm Policy, 92, 110; Wosten, The Land Utilization Program, 10, 13–14. Ultimately only $40,000,000 were spent for land purchases nationwide, and only $8,000,000 were used for acquisitions in the Great Plains.
The land purchase program in the Dust Bowl had many objectives. First, the federal government planned to purchase the most severely wind-eroded or "misuse lands" known as "blow hazards." Then, federal officials planned to halt wind erosion, turn the land-use projects into demonstration areas where farmers could observe the best soil conservation techniques, and eventually return the land to grazing under government management. At the same time, the land purchase program would enable the federal government to consolidate the farms which social scientists considered too small to provide an "adequate level of living." Submarginal lands, the social scientist argued, prevented farmers from affording the best soil conservation procedures, such as listing, terracing, and strip cropping. The farmers, whose continued occupancy was not "socially desirable," particularly those on easily blown soils in the Dust Bowl, were to be resettled on better lands elsewhere. Those who remained would be able to expand their operations by leasing the restored grasslands from the government. *

With a land-use policy formulated, the next step was to begin acquisition of submarginal lands. In order to do so, government officials first identified "problem" areas in the Dust Bowl where wind erosion was severe. Next, they completed a preliminary study of the area which detailed the economic and social characteristics of the residents, identified soil types, determined the area's best agricultural use, noted local opinion about the project, and estimated restoration costs. The preliminary plans also designated project boundaries. When the Secretary of Agriculture approved the preliminary plans, agency funds became available for land purchase. Officials then compiled records such as the landowner's name, legal description of the tract, mortgage, tax, and lien information. Employees at the regional offices recommended specific tracts for purchase which they then mapped and appraised. Negotiations for purchase began, and the government took options for the land. Upon federal acceptance, the option became a land purchase contract. When the Attorney General's office approved the transaction, it sent a voucher to the Treasury Department which issued a check. Finally, check and deed were exchanged, or if necessary, funds were disbursed to satisfy outstanding debts or liens. *

Although the government was prepared to use the power of eminent domain to acquire needed lands, it was not willing to exercise that authority in the Dust Bowl. Court ordered sales, officials realized, would have caused adverse publicity and alienated residents. Instead, an appraiser inspected the lands, consulted with cattlemen, farmers and others, and based his valuation on the land's productivity as grazing land, desirability, and comparable sales. The appraised value of improvements depended upon their condition and replacement costs. Where mortgages exceeded appraised land values, the AAA asked the Federal Land Bank and other lending agencies to renegotiate mortgages so that the owners would receive at least some equity. Upon authorization, the appraiser negotiated a selling price with the owner. Critics, nevertheless, charged that the federal government was attempting to coerce farmers into leaving the region and that appraisers were incompetent. Federal officials argued in turn that all sales were voluntary and that the appraisers were knowledgeable and capable of handling the task at hand. Moreover, if appraisers determined that certain lands within a purchase area were worth more in crops than in grass, the federal government was not interested in acquiring those lands. Instead, agency officials preferred for the farmers to remain on the land. Part of the problem was, of course, that Dust Bowl lands were worth far less during times of drought and severe wind erosion than in times of normal or above normal precipitation. Invariably, landowners hoped for high 1920s prices rather than depressed Dust Bowl valuations.

If a considerable number of tracts were not optioned, as was the case in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, where landowners joined to demand higher prices or where school lands were heavily mortgaged, policymakers instructed project managers to submit plans for supplemental land purchases. By expanding the project area, officials hoped that restoration could proceed without delay as well as prevent the project from

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being placed in jeopardy. The private lands interspersed in the purchase area could be purchased later if owners changed their minds and if funds were available. In the meantime, privately held lands were to be organized into soil conservation districts, so the appropriate conservation procedures could be applied to both public and private lands within the area of the land utilization project.8

Local merchants also criticized the land utilization projects. They feared that any loss of residents would irreparably damage their businesses. Still others objected to the federal land purchase program because it would ruin the tax base. In Morton County, Kansas, for example, the nearly 107,000 acres purchased represented 20 percent of the taxable land in the county and 9 percent of the taxable valuation. In four of the five townships involved in the land-use area, the tax bases were reduced from 2 to 14 percent. One township lost 65 percent of its taxable acreage and 50 percent of its tax base. In 1936 revenue losses were approximately $7,000. Two years later, federal purchases on the Mills project in New Mexico reduced the tax base for the school district by 17 percent. Federal economists expected future grazing revenues to cover only 50 percent of the lost taxes. The land-use projects, however, reduced the need for public services and helped consolidate schools and close roads, thereby offsetting some of the tax losses incurred by the local governments. Moreover, tax delinquencies were so high in the purchase areas that the immediate tax loss was not great. Eventually, policymakers hoped, income from the reestablished grazing areas would bring the counties more revenue than had been collected when taxes were paid. In 1937 the problem of tax losses was lessened when Title III of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act required the federal government to return 25 percent of the revenues earned on project lands to the counties for the maintenance of schools and roads. This provision lessened opposition to the land purchase program from local government.9

Some Dust Bowl landowners objected to the land-use program, because land sale payments that they had been promised were slow in arriving. Invariably, those who opted lands wanted payment imme-


diately to help meet financial obligations during those dust-laden, Depression years. Bureaucratic procedures, however, usually prevented payment for more than a year. This naturally fostered dissatisfaction with the program. After 1938 with the return of near-normal precipitation, more farmers and ranchers began opposing the land purchase program. The return of adequate rainfall caused the grass and the crops to grow and portended profitable returns once again from their lands. With new vegetation holding the soil during the early spring “blow months,” the land purchase program became less attractive than when the “black blizzards” had swept across the land only a few years earlier. Nevertheless, as long as the dust blew, most residents in the “blow hazard” area of the southern Great Plains supported the federal government’s land-use program.10

In spite of these problems and objections, the land-use program in the Dust Bowl became a grand experiment for the federal government and particularly for the Soil Conservation Service. A soil conservation project on such a large scale was unprecedented. At first, few people were certain about how best to restore the wind-eroded lands to grass. Both corrective and preventive soil erosion procedures clearly were needed, but no one was certain which techniques would work best. While some soil conservationists believed the lands should be allowed to resede naturally, no one knew how long the process would take. Estimates ranged from twenty-five to forty years depending on the length of time the land had been cultivated or grazed, annual precipitation, and the proximity of seed grasslands and blowing fields. More speed, however, was needed, and the Soil Conservation Service soon instituted a technical program to stabilize blowing lands.11

At first, the SCS listed the “blow lands” so that deep furrows would catch as much soil as possible. The SCS also planted drought-resistant cover crops, such as black amber cane and sudan grass, to reduce wind velocity at ground level and thereby hold moving soil. Usually, the SCS found that it needed to list and plant wind-eroded croplands two or three times before the soil stopped moving with the wind. During this time, the SCS hoped that weeds would quickly cover the land. Indeed, the key to stabilizing the soil was to cover it with vegetation of some sort. In the absence of the best grasses, the SCS utilized weeds, such as the Russian thistle, to hold the soil rather
than to let it remain barren and exposed to the wind. Still, even temporary stabilization took time. The SCS did not give major attention to permanent stabilization by planting native grasses on project lands until the early 1940s. SCS employees, however, also removed improvements such as fences and buildings from the acquired lands and erected new fences, hail control guards, and built farm ponds. During the course of project development, owners and relief workers were hired with Works Progress Administration, Public Works Administration, and Title III funds.

While the SCS worked to stabilize the soil, it also began experiments to determine the best grass varieties for reseeding the land purchase areas. In the beginning, the agency did not know which seeds or seedbed preparation methods were most suitable for the Dust Bowl. Consequently, with the aid of state experiment stations the SCS commenced trial plantings at selected sites to determine the best techniques. Soil scientists experimented with seeding both sandy and hard lands. From those experiments, they learned that sorghum, mowed at a height of twelve inches with the clipping left on the ground, provided the best cover crops for newly seeded grasses. The amount of seed needed depended upon germination, natural reseeding, planting methods, and seed varieties. Test plots on the Morton County project indicated that blue grama, sand love grass, side-oats grama, little bluestem, and sand bluestem were the most suitable varieties for sandy areas. Blue grama, side-oats grama, and buffalo grass were best for hard lands. Serious shortages of little bluestem, sand bluestem, and side-oats grama dictated, however, that more than 75 percent of the seeding mixtures for both sandy and hard soils be composed of blue grama, buffalo, and sand love grasses. Grass varieties, however, differed even within the Dust Bowl. Blue grama, crested wheat grass, western wheat grass, and Galleta, for example, were the best varieties for eastern New Mexico. Grain drills with double disk furrow openers planted the seeds about one inch deep. Some grass seeds were broadcast; that is, dropped at

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erect permanent corrals or limit the grazing areas by placing salt near water holes. Individual livestockmen or grazing associations also were responsible for the maintenance of fences and ponds. By 1943 the Morton County project, for example, had sufficient precipitation and new grass to enable the SCS to grant local cattlemen permits. The following year, the Morton County Grazing Association was organized to rent the grasslands for a portion of the year. Some federal officials hoped that in time these leases would pay for the projects. They estimated that the Mills project would be self-liquidating in fourteen years, while lands in Baca County on the Southeastern Colorado project would return a profit in ten to fifteen years.18

In retrospect, the federal land-use adjustment projects in the Dust Bowl did not involve the permanent removal of land from agriculture. Rather, the projects fostered a change or readjustment in agriculture on those lands from crop production and exploitative grazing to controlled livestock-raising and sound range management practices. Certainly, the federal government never intended to remove all Dust Bowl land from cultivation. That task would have been impractical given the region's settlement patterns and climatic and soil characteristics, and because the removal of larger land blocks would have been a financial impossibility. Funding was always less than had been requested or needed, and projects usually were reduced in scope due to monetary shortages. Reseeding sometimes stopped altogether as funds were exhausted. In addition, development work continually lagged because payments for optioned lands took time to process. Frequently options expired and authorities did not have the power to renew them. Moreover, the emergency relief legislation, which financed the projects prior to the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, mandated hiring the unemployed. The SCS, however, intended to employ resident operators both to speed the work and also to streamline the bureaucracy involved. Landowners had their own teams, tractors, and grain drills, relief workers did not. This necessitated the acquisition of expensive equipment from other sources. PWA funds, however, could be spent only for heavy equipment or for the construction of dams. In addition, the administrative transfer of responsibility among five agencies hindered project development. At best, the federal government hoped the land-use projects would show farmers and cattlemen the best con-


29.3 percent of those lands were in use at the time of purchase, while 49 percent were abandoned and 21.7 percent classified as "partially idle or abandoned." Resident owners occupied only 6.7 percent of the purchased acreage, while tenants occupied 10 percent of the tracts leaving 83.1 percent unoccupied. Clearly, the SCS did not force a host of landowners off their farms. Moreover, the 581,696 acres which the SCS had purchased by mid-1941 had been appraised at $1,892,251. Of that amount, croplands were valued at $3.44 per acre and grazing lands at $3.12 per acre. With subsurface rights included, the appraised value averaged $3.72 per acre. Although the price per acre was low when compared to valuations based on use during times of normal precipitation, Dust Bowl landowners were the only ones to receive more than the average assessed value per acre. On the other land utilization projects, prices averaged $.13 per acre below the appraised value.49

Ultimately, the Soil Conservation Service achieved success with the return of near normal precipitation during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Even so, the work of the SCS was important. The planting, terracing, furrowing, strip cropping, and artificial reseeding activities of the agency were instrumental in helping to stabilize the most severely wind-eroded areas. Moreover, government ownership of wind-eroded or potentially hazardous lands offered soil conservationists the opportunity to conduct experiments free from the host of agreements, regulations, and paperwork associated with private landownership.50

The land-use projects were not the panacea capable of solving all of the regional, economic, social, and erosion problems that many New Deal social scientists had hoped. As part of a broad soil conservation program in the Dust Bowl, however, the land-use projects contributed to the efforts of the SCS and other governmental agencies in halting wind erosion and restoring a sound agricultural base in the southern Great Plains. In addition, the land-use projects, together with the creation of soil conservation districts, helped to ensure the best conservation and land-use on both federal and private lands following the return of normal precipitation to the Dust Bowl.

The SCS continued its reseeding, grazing management, and other conservation work on the Dust Bowl land utilization projects until the early 1950s, when jurisdiction for the projects once again changed. On 2 November 1953, Ezra Taft Benson, Secretary of Agriculture, transferred the land utilization projects from the Soil Conservation Service to the Forest Service. Effective 4 January 1954, the mandate of the Forestry Service was to ensure a "sustained yield" of the grasses as well as "multiple use" of the land. As a result, the National Grasslands serve as wildlife refuges, sources of mineral wealth, and public recreation areas in addition to grazing lands. Above all, however, the National Grasslands in the Dust Bowl serve as a landmark to a great experiment in state planning and soil conservation during a time when the grass was not always green nor the sky always blue.51