SWCD Training Program | *January 2011*

Module 1:
History of the Conservation Movement Local, State and National

Dust Bowl Era

The state of the nation's soil resources during the 1930's, a decade known as the Dust Bowl Era, inspired the establishment of soil and water conservation districts across the nation. When farm families arrived in the Great Plains states, such as Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Colorado, they altered the landscape to suit their needs. These changes included replacing native grasses with agricultural crops and allowing cattle to graze on grounds less suitable for cultivation. When the U.S. entered World War I, the great demand for wheat to feed U.S. troops increased the conversion of even less appropriate land to agricultural use. In addition, the introduction of modern farm equipment allowed farmers to plow more land. Such intensive manipulation of the land without conservation practices amplified the effects of the natural drought cycle on the Great Plains states.

Crop vegetation, unlike indigenous plants, was not well suited for drought conditions. During the late 1920's and early 1930's widespread crop failure decreased ground cover. In addition, many farmers converted unsuccessful cropland to grazing land, where cattle trampled the already poor quality soil and thwarted ground cover renewal. The strong plains winds blew away unprotected topsoil. By the mid 1930's large dust storms were a common event across the area that became known as The Dust Bowl.

The once highly productive Great Plains reached a state of economic and ecological devastation.

Hugh Hammond Bennett

Bennett was born near Wadesboro in Anson County, North Carolina and graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1903. Immediately upon graduation, he became a soil surveyor, and conducted soil studies both in the United States and in other countries that eventually convinced him that soil erosion was a serious problem.

By the 1920s, Bennett was actively writing about soil erosion for popular magazines and scientific journals, and co-wrote a United States Department of Agriculture publication in 1928 titled *Soil Erosion: A National Menace*, which was regarded as his most influential work.

Bennett was also instrumental in the formation of the Soil Conservation Society of America.

Soil Erosion Service Formation

When the Soil Erosion Service was established as part of the United States Department of the Interior in September 1933, Bennett became the director. He continued to speak out on soil conservation issues, especially through the Dust Bowl years, and eventually influenced the passage of the Soil Conservation Act of April 27, 1935, which created the Soil Conservation Service at the USDA (later re-named the Natural Resources Conservation Service, NRCS). He remained at the head of that organization until he retired in 1951.

Hammond's efforts changed the mindset of American farmers toward soil conservation, and as director of the Soil Conservation Service, he helped teach new ways of cultivation that protected the soil and preserved fertility. The creation of the Soil Conservation Service and its inclusion in the United States Department of Agriculture also marked the US government’s recognition of the importance of conservation.

As director of the SCS, Bennett launched a campaign for soil conservation toward educating the public and politicians by identifying areas in the Dust Bowl where the combination of geographic and agricultural systems caused the most serious erosion.

Largely in response to Bennett's campaign for soil conservation, Representative James P. Buchanan of Texas attached an amendment to the 1930 appropriations bill authorizing the USDA to establish a series of soil erosion experiment stations. The Coon Creek Watershed Project, in southwestern Wisconsin, was the first of many watershed-based projects initiated to demonstrate soil conservation practices to farmers. The locations for these stations were selected by Bennett, and involved teams of researchers establishing plots to measure erosion conditions under various types of crops, soils, rotations, and their responses to different agricultural managements practices and structures.

Conservation District Origins

Need for Local Input for Conservation Work

Although Bennett's work was a promising start to the conservation movement, many recognized that conservation needed to spread to the community level. 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 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 with local 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 good soil into the ocean."

These thoughts are as applicable today as in 1936.

In 1937, President Roosevelt drafted a special recommendation to each state governor for the formation of local soil conservation programs. He suggested that the programs work on the local level directly with land owners.

The first soil and water conservation district was formed in 1937 in North Carolina.

Today, there are approximately 3,000 SWCDs nationwide whose boundaries encompass 98% of all privately-owned land in the 50 states.

Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Overview of State Conservation District Law formation

SWCDs were formed in Alaska in 1947, brought forward as House Bill 85, introduced by Representative Walter Huntley, and ultimately signed into Law by Governor Ernest Gruening. Walter E. Huntley was one of the original colony settlers in Palmer and became a U.S. Marshall in 1951. The Alaska District was formed in this initial process and from the Alaska District all other Districts were formed.

Territory of Alaska House of Representatives, 18th session, 1947.

Front row (l. to r.): Lew Joy, Rob Hoopes, Maurice Johnson, Steve Vukovich, Joe Coble. Second row (l. to r.): Wm Egan, Ed Anderson, W.W. Laws, Ludwig Ost. Third row (l. to r.): G.E. Almquist, Harry Newell, James Nolen, Dewey Anderson, Andrew Hope, Frank G. Johnson. Fourth row (l. to r.): Glen Barnett, Walter Huntley, Wm Paul (clerk), ? Bonnie Jo Gronroos, Dr. Pollard, Anita Garnick. Fifth row (l. to r.): Oscar Gill (President), Amos Cole (Sergaent-in-arms), Thelma Engstrom.

Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Local Conservation District Formation & History

1947 through 1949 - Initial Act that created the Alaska Soil Conservation District and the Alaska Soil Conservation Board, an advisory Board above the Alaska District in State hierarchy; allows for creation of sub-districts; definitions go on "land occupier" or "occupier of land."

SWCD	Acreage	SWCD	Acreage
Alaska	331,298,200	Kodiak	3,134,209
Anchorage	1,251,640	Palmer	1,572,804
Fairbanks	3,218,856	Salcha-Delta	2,493,650
Homer	1,048,636	Upper-Susitna	1,707,746
Kenai	298,430	Wasilla	2,493,650
Kenny Lake	206,522	Mid-Yukon Kuskokwim	9,793,700

* As of 2006

1960 - Alaska Soil Conservation Board moved under the Governor; powers are limited, giving more authority to sub-districts and the Commissioner of DNR;

1983 - Commissioner or delegate given a seat on the Alaska Soil Conservation District; "Water" added to the titles; definition switches to "users of land", "farming" is deleted to allow for forestry, etc., and changes wording to "districts" rather than "sub-districts"; Board tied to five major land areas of the state; Statute delegates recommendation of the Board regarding formation of districts; and dictates all other areas of the state not within a local district to be within the Alaska District;

1996 - Board's title changed to "Natural Resources Conservation and Development Board"; and

2000 - Housekeeping matter, overlooked in prior legislation, AS 41.10.100(b)(6) changed to read "...in the state", removing "Alaska District"; another subsequent minor change in 2001 from "...division of lands and water management" to "division of lands."

"The Commissioner may, on the recommendation of the board, create soil and water conservation districts in the state upon petition signed by 25 or more land users setting out the proposed boundaries of the proposed district." (AS 41.10.130)

The authority in this section has been delegated to the NRCDB pursuant to Department Order 114, January 25, 1993, (See Module 13, References) and therefore the steps below refer to the NRCDB.

Step 1 – Creating a New District

If the intent is to create a new district, the following steps must be followed:

- The NRCDB must receive a petition signed by at least 25 bona fide land users operating within the proposed boundary area of the proposed district describing the proposed boundaries. (AS 41.10.130) The petitioners should designate one person as their contact person. (*See* Appendix, Petition to Amend or Form Soil and Water Conservation Districts). Cooperative agreements will be furnished by the NRCDB after creation of the district and must be signed by at least 25 land users from the district within 30 days of the district formation, otherwise the new district automatically will be dissolved.

- The Executive Director of the NRCDB shall review the petition to confirm that the required number of petitioners are bona fide land users and, if so, shall present this information to the NRCDB and to the petitioners' contact person.

- The NRCDB shall proceed under Steps 2 – 4 below.

Step 1 – Changing a District Boundary

If the intent is for a district to expand its existing boundary, the effect of which takes away area from the Alaska District or another adjacent district, or some combination of districts, the following steps must be followed:

- The district wishing to expand shall notice and conduct a public hearing on the proposed expansion.

- The district shall forward a district board resolution approving the expansion to the NRCDB and the adjacent affected district(s) with a map of the adjusted boundaries. The resolution shall include written findings regarding the need to expand and the factors justifying the proposed physical boundaries, utilizing the factors listed in Step 3.

- The adjacent affected district(s) shall, after notice and public hearing, forward a resolution (or resolutions) either recommending or opposing the expansion to the NRCDB.

Step 2

The NRCDB must notice and conduct at least one public hearing prior to the creation of a new district or prior to approving or rejecting a requested change of district boundary.

Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

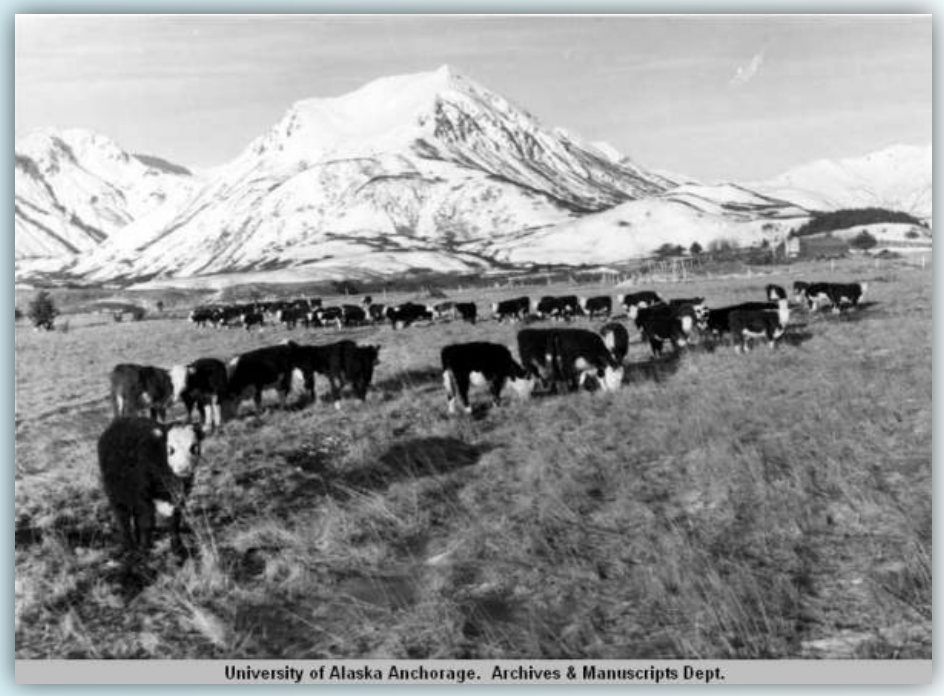
Step 3

In approving a new district or a requested change of district boundary, the NRCDB may make boundary adjustments, if it finds such adjustments are warranted. Factors that may be considered by the NRCDB in this regard include:

- input from land users;
- state and local land use plans;
- the presence and location of agricultural lands, either officially designated as such or currently being used as such;
- topographical features (e.g., mountain ranges, river drainages, roads and similar features) that make it easier to map and describe the boundaries; and
- political boundaries (e.g. boroughs, municipalities, cities, senate or house districts, national or state park or refuge boundaries) that make it easier to map and describe the boundaries.

Step 4

The NRCDB shall, in accordance with AS 41.10.130, prescribe the duties of the new district or either reaffirm or amend the duties of the current district seeking the boundary change.



University of Alaska Anchorage. Archives & Manuscripts Dept.

Step 5 – New District

A newly created district shall hold an organizational meeting, which will be noticed and conducted by the Executive Director of the NRCDB. Nominations for supervisors, who must be land users operating within the district, shall be submitted to the Executive Director of the NRCDB at the meeting. The NRCDB shall appoint supervisors at random from the nomination list. Supervisors appointed under this section serve only until the next regular election.

Step 5 – Expanded District

Land users within the new area included within the boundary change of the current district are now entitled to the same rights and obligations of other land users already within the district. If the expanded district has a vacancy on its board, it should consider appointing a qualified individual from the new area added to the district to fill the vacancy.

Changing A Name Or Dissolving A District

CHANGING A DISTRICT NAME

The SWCD may adopt a change of name, which must be approved by the NRCDB.

DISSOLVING A DISTRICT

In the event a district is for any reason no longer viable, the district shall dissolve and its boundaries and land users shall be absorbed into the Alaska District. Unless otherwise directed by the NRCDB, a district shall submit a written plan of dissolution to the NRCDB, NRCS and AACD which shall include details on wrapping up its existing projects and financial affairs and include a proposed method of transferring district records, accounts and equipment to the Alaska District. District supervisors shall remain responsible for district affairs until otherwise determined by the NRCDB.

Conservation District Values
aka "Mission"

Providing conservation and sustainable development technical assistance to local land users to address natural resource management concerns, offering natural resource education opportunities to communities and forming partnerships dedicated to wise use of natural resources.