

# green fields

IT WAS THE 1930S, and rural people clung to the land as if it were a part of them, as integral as bone or sinew. But the land betrayed them—or they betrayed it, depending on the telling of history. In the black-and-white portraits of the time, dismay is palpable, grooves of anxiety worn deep around the eyes. In scattered fields throughout the country, farmers took the stitching out of the soil and turned the earth upside down, so the old saying goes. Decades of bad farming practices had eroded topsoil that had accumulated for centuries; then came years of drought, and the land simply gave up. As farmers looked out over acres of what once was wheat, corn or

sugarbeet, dust rose to meet their gaze.

“The dust storms, they just come in boiling like angry clouds,” remembers Maxine Nickelson, 81, who lives near Oakley, Kansas, less than 10 miles from the farm where she grew up during the Dust Bowl. “The dust piles would get so high they’d cover up the fence posts along the roads. Yeah, it was bad. We had to use a scoop shovel to take dirt out of the house. The people were very discouraged. They thought something was turning against them. There was little rain. Daddy had to sell all the cattle

because there was no feed. We also had a grasshopper plague. There would be so many flying, they would darken the sun. It was really, really hard times.”

Times have changed. Now, when the wind blows at The Nature Conservancy’s 17,000-acre Smoky Valley Ranch, 15 miles south of where Nickelson grew up, it whispers through a thriving shortgrass prairie. For the most part, the dust is still. Land that once was plowed under and farmed—or “broke out,” as farmers say—has been reseeded with buffalo and gamma grasses. Such native plants have

extensive root systems that can withstand the extreme weather on the plains. While a nine-year drought has been dragging the region by the heels, farmers—and the landscape—aren’t facing anything near the desperation of the 1930s.

That the country hasn’t seen another Dust Bowl is testament to advances in farming equipment and cultivation practices and other shifts in farming techniques. But perhaps the most significant changes have stemmed from the farming community’s embrace of conservation, largely spurred by the federal Farm

## 1930s



How the Farm Bill, conceived in Dust Bowl desperation, became one of the world’s most powerful forces for conservation.

BY REBECCA CLARREN



**CONSERVATION KICKOFF** The Dust Bowl hits the central United States and Canada; in response, President Roosevelt signs into law the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, which provides direct payments to farmers who cut production of crops and livestock. After the Supreme Court finds direct payments unconstitutional, the law is rewritten in 1936 to provide payments for soil conservation.

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Bill's huge pool of financial incentives rewarding farmers for efforts to sustain soil, water and wildlife habitats.

A piece of legislation reauthorized every five or six years, the Farm Bill is mostly known for its commodity-support programs, which subsidize production of more than two dozen crops, including wheat, rice and cotton. Few people realize that the legislation is also the largest single source of federal funding for conservation on private land in the United States: \$20 billion in the past five years alone.

For nearly 15 years, The Nature Conservancy has been working with Congress to steer funding from the Farm Bill toward landscapes with high conservation value. The last Farm Bill, passed by Congress in 2002, provided record funding for the environment. This year, Con-

gress is expected to reauthorize a new Farm Bill, though it's a sure bet that this time there will be less money available. With a historic budget deficit, maintaining existing conservation funds won't be easy. Even so, the Conservancy is working with other conservation and agricultural groups to seed America's farm future with an environmental ethos.

"The Farm Bill is such a powerful tool to help fight some of the threats to agricultural lands and to help farmers and ranchers continue their traditional lifestyles," says Adrienne Wojciechowski, a federal policy advisor with the Conservancy. "Farming and conservation have a lot of mutual goals, and we want to see those lifestyles and economies continue while protecting our natural resources at the same time."

**BACK IN THE 1920S AND '30S**, when Maxine Nickelson was growing up poor in Kansas, a number of ideas about farming techniques were grounded more in tradition than science. Farmers were raised on the old conceit that rain would follow the plow, which proved disastrous when a decade of high rainfall in the 1920s was followed by drought in the 1930s. And many farmers, as a matter of pride, planted their crops in neatly tailored, unbending rows. This practice of disregarding contours and hillsides often created furrows for rain and wind to wash away the soil's nutrients. Fueled by such practices, erosion was silently scraping away the country's farmlands.

But the folly of such practices wasn't unanticipated by everyone. In 1928, Hugh Hammond Bennett, the original

crusader for farmland conservation, published a report for the U.S. Department of Agriculture titled "Soil Erosion, A National Menace." The report made an almost puritanical call for the nation to reform what it called "the evils of ... land wastage" and stressed "the need for increased practical information."

"What," Bennett asked, "would be the feeling of this Nation should a foreign nation suddenly enter the United States and destroy 90,000 acres of land, as erosion has been allowed to do in a single county?"

Bennett, the son of North Carolina

farmers and an employee at the USDA's Bureau of Soils, argued in countless journal articles and speeches that soil erosion caused by farming practices—if left unchecked—would hinder the nation's ability to produce food. By 1930, largely because of his undaunted dedication, Congress had authorized funding for a small group of experimental field stations that demonstrated how farmers could prevent soil erosion. But Bennett wanted more support and money.

Called to testify before the Senate Public Lands Committee, Bennett showed that then, like now, a little bit of

drama goes a long way. On the morning of the hearing, he rechecked the weather reports calling for a major dust storm to roll into Washington, D.C., out of the Ohio Valley. As the hearing dragged on, the storm arrived on cue. Bennett asked the senators to move from the great mahogany table to gaze out the windows on the baleful storm. "Everything moved along quite nicely thereafter," recalled Bennett years later.

The soil conservation act of 1935 created the Soil Conservation Service, and Bennett became its first chief (a position he held until he retired in 1951). The agency started up field offices throughout the country to help farmers develop plans to save soil. Young boys and men, hired by President Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps,

## 1940s



**WARTIME DEMAND** The Soil Conservation Service, a federal conservation program headed up by "Big" Hugh Hammond Bennett, educates farmers about soil conservation and improved farming techniques. But conservation concerns take a back seat when farmers ramp up production to meet the demands of war with Germany and Japan.



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**COPING WITH EXCESS** Crop prices slump as a result of increased competition from recovering postwar economies in Europe and Asia. In response, U.S. federal officials create programs to cope with excess commodities such as potatoes and wheat. One program, the Soil Bank, aims to boost prices by taking 29 million acres out of production for conservation.



## 1950s



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would help farmers create terraces, replant trees for wildlife habitat and control gullies. By mid-1936, the service was overseeing 147 demonstration projects, 48 nurseries, 23 experiment stations and more than 10,000 full-time employees who were responsible for supervising the efforts of 23,000 Works Progress Administration workers.

“It was a good thing they did that, because farmers started changing their practices,” says Nickelson. “Farmers didn’t like being told what to do; they thought they were losing their right to do what they wanted with their land. But they didn’t have a choice, and I think all of them thought it was a good thing, too. Soil conservation made a big difference.”

The legislation was also, of course, a

handy and legal way to bring farm families like Nickelson’s some desperately needed economic relief—in the form of financial aid to farmers who agreed to idle land—at a time when 40 percent of the American population still lived on farms. As Nickelson remembers, when the checks arrived in the mail, it was like Christmas. In subsequent farm legislation throughout the 1930s, Congress funneled more money to farmers who would replace soil-depleting crops like corn and wheat with cover crops like grasses or legumes. While the conservation benefits of these initial programs were modest, legislators hailed them—and the political capital they inspired—as a great success.

Then World War II hit, and farmers rushed to cash in on high prices for

crops to feed troops and a hungry world market, tilling up acres of land that had been idled for conservation. After the war ended, conservation continued to rust in the corner of the nation’s toolshed. While Congress did a few things, such as creating soil banks that put some farmlands off limits for five- or 10-year stretches and paying farmers who let hunters onto their conservation acreage, for the next 30 years history pretty much wrote an empty chapter on conservation in agriculture.

The lean times for conservation intensified in the 1970s. Russians were facing food shortages, and the U.S. secretary of agriculture encouraged American farmers to “plant fence row to fence row.” Within a few years, a quarter of all

farmers on the plains had tilled up grasslands they had idled for conservation so they could produce wheat for the Russians and reap the high prices caused by surging demand.

“The pressure was on to maximize production, and there was a push from lenders to encourage growth and expansion,” says Don Reeves, a farmer in Nebraska’s Platte River Valley, an area he calls “God’s favorite country.” “Conservation was way down on anybody’s list. There was scarcely any attention paid to the impact on the environment.”

**BACKPEDALING ON CONSERVATION** taxed the landscape and took a toll on wildlife. Of the 23 grassland bird species being closely monitored from 1966 to 1979, nearly

half saw their numbers drop significantly. Populations of the lark bunting and grasshopper sparrow declined across the Midwest by more than 50 percent. In 1982 alone, 3 billion tons of soil eroded across the nation, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The recently formed Environmental Protection Agency had begun conducting studies on water quality and found that agricultural practices were contributing to the pollution of rivers and streams. Ironically, this environmental damage, paired with what became a glut of farmland in the 1980s, drove farmers and environmentalists to team up and create a lasting achievement for both conservation and agriculture in the form of the 1985 Farm Bill.

When the Farm Bill came up for reauthorization that year, a small coalition of environmental groups, spurred by the dismal state of habitat and water quality on farmlands, presented Congress with a pragmatic strategy that would change the future of conservation. Rather than lobby the House and Senate agriculture committees, which were stacked with farming interests and old-timers, to “save the birds,” the coalition unveiled a plan to save the government money.

For the previous 50 years, Congress had been paying farmers not to farm, as a way to control supply and prices. But these short-term “set-asides” were expensive. When Maureen Hinkle, a lobbyist for the National Audubon Society, and her cohorts realized that giving farmers

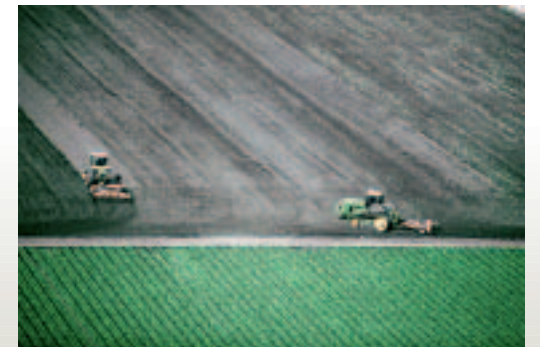
## 1960s & 1970s



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**FENCE TO FENCE**  
Russian grain purchases boost the price of crops, leading the U.S. agriculture secretary to call for American farmers to “plant fence row to fence row.” A study finds that 26 percent of the farmers in one national conservation program plowed up newly established grasslands as soon as their conservation contracts expired.



a 10-year contract would be less expensive for taxpayers than annual payments, which varied from year to year, they thought, “bingo.”

“What sold the agricultural committees that day was not wildlife,” says Hinkle, who is now retired. “It was economics and production control.”

The bill created the Conservation Reserve Program, which took more than 36 million acres—an area about the size of Iowa—out of agricultural production. The bill also provided new regulatory teeth. Under the new “sodbuster” program, farmers of highly erodible land were required to implement a conservation plan within a decade or lose government subsidies. And a “swampbuster” program similarly penalized farmers who drained

wetlands for cultivation.

“It was a major turning point,” says Stephen Lovejoy, an agricultural economist at Michigan State University. “Now we had legislation that said we want to protect not just soil productivity but wildlife habitat and water quality.”

Since then, the environmental protections afforded by the Farm Bill have continued to grow, along with an increasingly robust lobby for conservation. In 2002, riding on the tails of the largest budget surplus in history, Congress packed \$74 billion, distributed over five years, into the Farm Bill, with \$17 billion for conservation alone. The bill includes a host of initiatives that the Conservancy and other groups have helped to create in the past two decades, initiatives that have resulted in

better protections for grasslands, wetlands, range and endangered species.

The country’s changing demographics—today farmers make up only 1 percent of the U.S. population—has inverted the political calculus that has driven the marriage of conservation and agriculture in the United States. Members of Congress from farming states now rely on environmental programs as a critical enticement for support from suburban and urban legislators.

“For conservation to succeed in this country, you need to occupy the center and work with the people on the land whose interests are affected by your goals,” says Jeff Eisenberg, a former policy advisor at the Conservancy who now works for the National Cattlemen’s Association. Sixty-one percent of the land

in America is privately owned; anyone who cares about the environment can’t be content to bank on the country’s public lands as sufficient habitat reserves or bastions for cleaning water, air and soil.

Without partnerships with agricultural landowners, the environmental movement can’t thrive, says Eisenberg. “Whether or not you agree with farming practices, there is no denying the reach of the Farm Bill to positively affect landscapes.”

**NOW, HISTORY HAS CAUGHT UP TO THE FUTURE.** Looking ahead to 2007, the Conservancy is hoping to build on momentum gained for conservation in the 2002 Farm Bill. That might be difficult, given there is less money in the pot to go around this year. Some environmental groups want the government to redirect money currently given to farmers for commodity payments on rice, wheat, corn and the like. They hope to use that money to fund the conservation components of the legislation.

The Conservancy is pursuing a less confrontational approach. The reason environmental groups were able to secure such large gains for conservation spending in the past is because of our partnerships with farmers,

says Stephen Frerichs, a consultant on agricultural policy to the Conservancy. “We work with a lot of farmers; we know they care about conservation, but they have to make money first. We prefer to work with the ag committees instead of going after their constituents.”

The Conservancy’s agriculture experts have drafted a list of recommendations they hope Congress will implement. The Conservancy wants the Agriculture Department to fund science-based assessments of existing programs under the Farm Bill and target conservation funding at ecologically critical areas to generate the biggest conservation gains for each dollar spent. In addition, the Conservancy hopes Congress will create incentives for farmers to more actively manage wetlands and



## 1990s

## 1980s



**THE FARM BILL GOES GREEN**  
Environmentalists team up with farmers to support a new Farm Bill containing significant incentives for conservation. The bill, signed by President Reagan in 1985, launches the Conservation Reserve Program, which provides farmers with payments to take out of rotation environmentally sensitive and erosion-prone lands for 10 to 15 years. About 36 million acres are set aside in 2006.



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**PROTECTING WETLANDS AND WILDLIFE**  
The 1996 Farm Bill creates the Wetlands Reserve Program, which provides incentives for farmers to restore wetlands that have been drained. The bill also kicks off cost-sharing schemes to support farming practices that protect water quality, slow groundwater pollution and benefit at-risk species such as the greater prairie chicken. The new Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program provides farmers with 75 percent of the cost of restoring farmland to wildlife habitats.



reserve lands. Idle farmlands could offer additional conservation gains—such as wildlife habitat and cleaner air and water—if farmers actively managed the land using prescribed burns, seasonal flooding or techniques that suppress invasive weeds and pests.

“We recognize that federal funding is tight,” says the Conservancy’s Wojciechowski. “Our focus is on how can we improve the programs we presently have—how do we get them to be greener with smaller tweaks; how can we get increased funding where it is needed; and how can get more environmental conservation bang for our buck?”

To that end, the Conservancy is working with a diverse coalition of groups

that range from Ducks Unlimited to the Farm Bureau, lobbying members of congressional agricultural committees with statistics, charts and numbers that show the success of existing programs.

It’s too early to know whether politicians are likely to endorse any of the Conservancy’s recommendations. Congress will begin drafting the Farm Bill this spring; for now, legislators are in a period of information gathering.

**BACK ON THE LAND** near Smoky Valley Ranch, Maxine Nickelson is left alone with her black-and-white photos from her childhood and memories of the land: When her husband died a few years ago, she quit the farm, and of her four children,

not one has chosen to go into agriculture.

“A farmer’s life is a very, very hard life,” she says. “The government should absolutely be helping the farmer with programs that help the land and help the farmers to stay there. We have to learn to take care of our environment. I don’t think we’ll ever have a Dust Bowl again because of the improved farming practices, thank goodness. But, oh, I don’t think anyone who didn’t live it can know how bad it was; it’s something you just don’t like to relive.”

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PHOTOGRAPH © CHRIS HELZER/INC

# 2000s



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**PROMOTING PRIVATE CONSERVATION** The 2002 Farm Bill significantly boosts conservation and environmental programs. For example, the budget of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program is increased from \$200 million in 2002 to \$1.3 billion today. The amount of acreage supported by the Conservation Reserve Program rises from 36.4 million to 39.2 million acres. Emphasis shifts away from counting the number of acres under conservation toward improving the quality of protections through practices such as terracing fields, reducing the amount of soil tilled and creating buffer zones along stream banks.