

The Amazing Spread of Soil Conservation Districts

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SOIL CONSERVATION DISTRICTS were unheard of only fifteen years ago, yet they now cover nearly all of the privately owned lands in the United States and its territories. Before a discussion of the spread of soil conservation districts is possible, a brief résumé of the conditions that contributed to their development is necessary. Important contributing factors include the following:

1. Declining yields from the farm lands and range lands of the country had been the general rule, in spite of advances that had been made in farm- and range-management methods, better seed, better livestock, better machinery, and greater knowledge of the problems involved. This situation had resulted in a dissatisfied feeling regarding our agricultural production.

2. Erosion losses caused by water or wind or both from farm lands and range lands had become all too common during the recent years. This was certainly a contributing factor to the decline in production. However, relatively few people knew of it, still fewer gave any thought to it, and extremely few sensed its importance to the nation.

3. Ten Soil Erosion Experiment Stations were established by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1929, 1930, and 1931. They were located in nine different states; namely, North Carolina, Ohio, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas (2), and Washington. The research from these stations provided, within two years' time, a startlingly graphic picture of the excessive damage being done to the lands of this country by water and by wind under existing agricultural practices.

4. As a result of this research, the erosion situation appeared sufficiently serious to bring about the establishment of the Soil Erosion Service late in 1933. Its purpose was to meet this threat to our land base with a comprehensive program of soil conservation.

5. These two independent moves against erosion were combined into the Soil Conservation Service in April, 1935. At this time, the Service was conducting several hundred small watershed projects on

erosion control in every section of the nation. In many instances, the technicians, labor, equipment, and materials were provided through Civilian Conservation Corps camps. It soon became evident to state, regional, and national leaders that this procedure was not likely to get proper land use *applied* on the hundreds of millions of acres in the United States.

6. In an effort to better meet the situation, some of these leaders developed what became known as a model "State Soil Conservation Districts Law."¹ Its purposes were: first, to get farmers and ranchers to shoulder more of the responsibility and effort in soil and moisture conservation work; and second, to implement local farmer and rancher initiative and responsibility acting in unison when they desire to do so. These local districts provide a basis for the Soil Conservation Service and other public and private agencies to help landowners and operators with their conservation problems in an integrated manner. This law, with many legal variations in the individual states and territories, was quickly adopted by most of the legislatures (Figure 1).

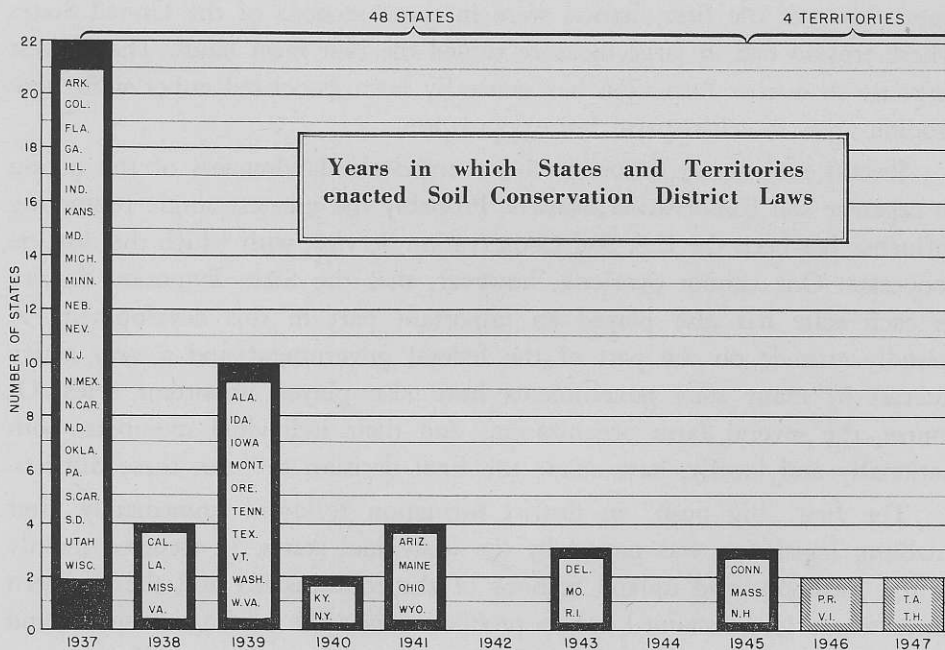


Figure 1. Years in which states and territories enacted soil conservation district laws.

¹ A Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law, Soil Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936.

The six conditions outlined above set the stage for the formation of soil conservation districts. The first such districts were organized in 1937, and many new ones were still being organized in the early nineteen-fifties (Figure 2). Today every state and territory has passed this enabling legislation under which landowners can organize soil conservation districts.

What is a soil conservation district? It is a local unit of government, organized and operated under state law and by landowners and operators for the purpose of conservation of soil and water resources, the control and prevention of soil erosion, and better land use generally. In thirty-four of the forty-eight states, it is also empowered to regulate land use, provided a *large enough* majority of the landowners are favorable. The affairs of the district are run by an election board of resident farmers, usually five in number. This board serves without remuneration. A considerable number of grass conservation districts in Montana, wind erosion districts in Texas, and one irrigation district in California are acceptably functioning as conservation districts.

It has been interesting to see, and now it is important to explain, some variations in local acceptance of these legal subdivisions within the different states. Most of the first districts were in those sections of the United States where erosion had in large measure ruined the best farm lands. The slowest response to district formation has generally been associated either with non-eroding areas or with sparse farm population.

Several motivating influences have urged the landowners of the nation to organize soil conservation districts. Probably the greatest single promoting influence has been the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, with which the districts cooperate. One cannot overlook, however, that the State Extension Service in each state has also played an important part in this development. A friendly attitude on the part of the federal government and a very active interest by many state governments have also played important roles. Of course, the several farm organizations and their individual members, both nationally and locally, have made the final decision to form these districts.

The first "big push" in district formation followed immediately after enabling legislation was passed by the individual states. It occurred mainly in the Piedmont and upland sections of the southeastern and the southern states where long-sustained cotton production was the leading cause of land damage. In addition, an early sprinkling of soil conservation districts was common throughout the Midwest. A small focal center was in the rougher farm lands along the upper Mississippi River in Wisconsin and Minnesota, while the only center in the West was in Utah. Within two years after the

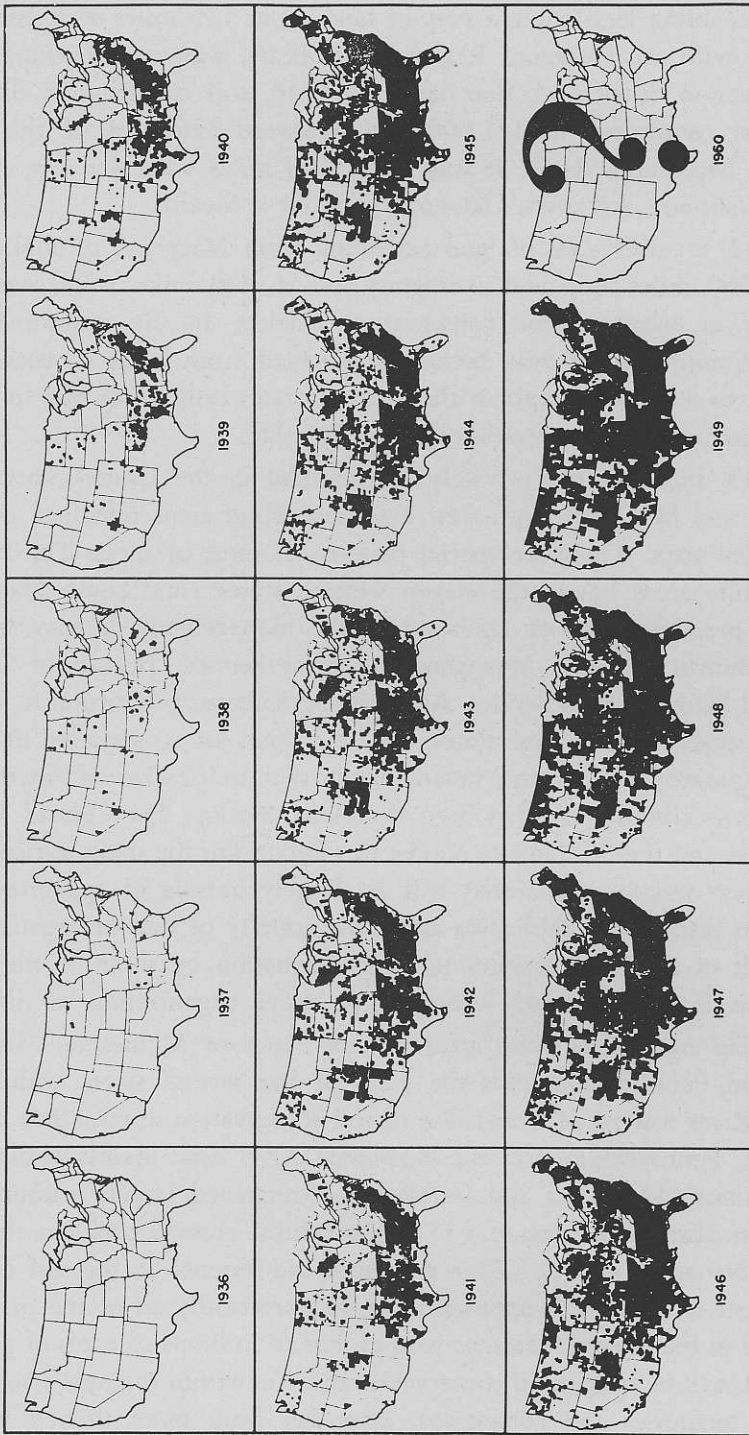


Figure 2. Spread of soil conservation districts in the United States.

passage of enabling legislation, a strip of land about 150 miles wide and 500 miles long, with the Piedmont Region as its heart, was well speckled with soil conservation districts. A year later, in 1940, soil conservation districts were almost continuous in a 1,000-mile westward extension of this area beyond the Mississippi River. It was about 500 miles wide and lay mainly in Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico.

By 1942, a curved belt of land extending from Maryland through New Mexico, 2,000 miles long and averaging 300 to 400 miles wide, was preponderantly in organized soil conservation districts. In the meantime, the map of the entire nation was becoming speckled from coast to coast and from north to south, although in the western states only Utah had in large measure gone into soil conservation districts by 1943.

By 1946, much of the privately owned land in the United States was in districts, and by 1949 only a few extensive white areas remained on the United States maps. There are special reasons for most of these. The largest of these white areas lies in the eleven western states (and South Dakota). It consists predominantly of lands under the management of four federal agencies: Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and National Park Service. Although agricultural production is locally of extreme importance in these states, the farm lands are so scattered in thousands of separated valleys and upland areas that unification of interest in organized conservation work has been slower to develop. The Central Valley of California and the Willamette Valley of Oregon are the main agricultural areas in these western states that still lie largely outside of organized soil conservation districts. In these two areas, the scarcity of district organization is the result of earlier opposition to its formation by some of the local people. This is now gradually changing to active organization of districts.

The other noticeable white areas are the states of Minnesota, Missouri, Indiana, and Pennsylvania, plus the parts of the several states within the Tennessee River watershed. Formation of soil conservation districts has lagged in Missouri, Pennsylvania, and the Tennessee River area mainly because of local opposition. Minnesota and Indiana have remained largely without soil conservation districts because of (1) a less critical erosion problem than in their neighbor states and/or (2) a degree of indifference to the soil conservation district movement. It appears today that practically all of the privately owned land in the United States, as well as tens of millions of acres of public-owned land, will be within soil conservation districts within the next five years.

In the territories and possessions, there has been more than a whole-hearted interest in district formation. In Alaska, the legislature went all the

way and declared all land in the territory as the Alaska Soil Conservation District. Subdistricts are organized in those areas where there is sufficient interest in soil and water conservation. These subdistricts function very much as do the soil conservation districts in the United States. The entire area of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands has been organized into districts, and there are 10 active districts in Hawaii. As of July 1, 1951, 2,349 soil conservation districts were cooperating with the Soil Conservation Service in the states and territories. They covered 1,305,110,000 acres and included more than 76 per cent of all land in farms and more than 82 per cent of the farms in the United States.

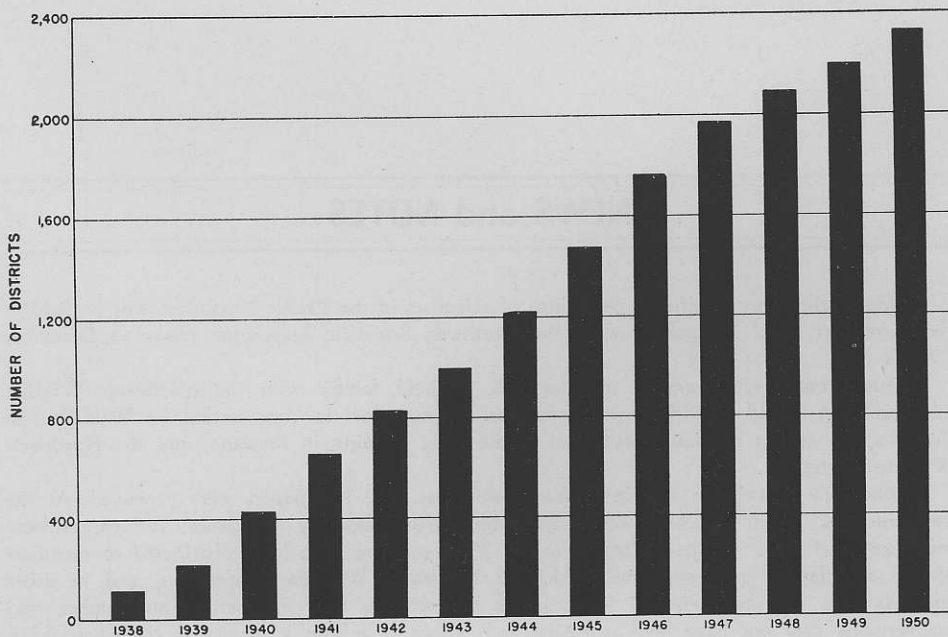


Figure 3. Number of conservation districts organized, cumulative by calendar years, 1938-1950.

The South undisputedly has led in the formation of soil conservation districts, and the Midwest (especially the Plains States) was not far behind. Although conservative New England started late, this region has unexpectedly moved full-speed ahead of late. Regionally, the Far West has trailed the entire country. The potential effects of these districts upon the nation and its economy are just beginning to be felt, and it is still too early to predict either

their immediate or their ultimate importance to the national economy of this country. The landowners have attempted to stabilize a deteriorating resource, and their degree of success or failure in this objective is an open question. Time alone can answer.

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NEWS and NOTES

One of the most significant gatherings of scientists in the Pacific Northwest will be held at the Davenport Hotel in Spokane when the Northwest Scientific Association meets on December 29 and 30.

This twenty-seventh annual meeting will be held jointly with the Northwest Wildlife Conference. A single two-day program will be designed for the new section on Wildlife and Fisheries, which was officially established at the 1952 meeting in Portland, and the Northwest Wildlife Conference.

When the Association met in Spokane two years ago, 118 papers were presented. At the 1952 meeting, which was held jointly with the Oregon Academy of Science, 166 papers were presented. Invitations to present papers at the 1953 meeting have been distributed to members of the Association, to participants of former Northwest Wildlife Conferences, and to other scientists who may be interested in attending the meeting. Any member or nonmember who inadvertently may not have been contacted and wishes to submit a paper for consideration in the formulation of the program may do so through the cognizant section chairman or through the over-all program chairman, Dr. William H. Baker, Department of Botany, University of Idaho.