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Throughout the 1930s, dust storms swept the country, desiccating many farms throughout South Dakota and the Midwest, such as this barn lot in Dallas, S.D., in 1936. Along with dry and hot weather, conservation practices of the time contributed to the disaster. The federal government has since worked with farmers to change land management practices to prevent land from being destroyed in a similar manner.

Up From The Dust

Changes In Resource Management Have Produced Tremendous Benefits For Agriculture And The Nation

BY DEREK BARTOS
derek.bartos@yankton.net

On Nov. 11, 1933, severe winds stripped the topsoil from desiccated farmlands in South Dakota, sending massive amounts of dust into the air throughout the region. It was just one of many in a series of strong dust storms that hit the country's prairie lands throughout the 1930s, with the most severe storms hitting areas in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico. The Dust Bowl rendered millions of acres of farmland useless, and hundreds of thousands of people had to leave their homes. While drought and heat contributed to the disaster, land management practices were to blame, as well. "A lot of the native grasslands were plowed under to facilitate row crop production back then," said Mark Brannen, district conservationist for the National Resource Conservation Service's Yankton office. "They were basically changing land use from

grasslands to crop lands." Brannen said much of the damage was done through moldboard plowing techniques, which were practiced by most of the farmers at the time. "That basically turned all that residue under and exposed soil with no protection at all from the wind and dry weather they encountered back then," he said. Hoping to restore ecological balance to the country, the federal government in 1933 stepped in. During the following years, several reform programs were put in place to help farmers recover from their losses and discover better land management practices. The Resettlement Administration purchased submarginal land from farmers and resettled them in group farms on better land. The Soil Conservation Service, now the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), encouraged operations to prevent further soil erosion. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration also restricted production by paying

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farmers subsidies to leave some of their fields unused. Farmers responded, forming conservation districts, practicing different forms of land management and planting marginal land with native or improved grasses. Brannen said one of the most influential changes was the adoption of reduced tillage practices. "Hardly anybody plows anymore," he said. "You're always leaving an amount of residue on the surface. That protects the soil from wind erosion and, with some of the sloping ground, it protects it from water erosion." Today, the federal government continues to offer incentive programs with the goals of better crop

rotation and less tillage, Brannen said. These include the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program. "With EQIP, a person can apply for incentive payments for residue management, which is basically leaving a percentage of residue on the surface," he said. "The Conservation Stewardship Program basically takes into account what you do for your whole operation — tillage, crop rotation, pesticide management. The more conservation-oriented you are, the more incentives there are." While conservation practices have come a long way since the Dust Bowl, preserving land can always be trumped by business,

Brannen said. "You still have to make a living on the land out there, so economics drives a lot of it," he said. Brannen said he is concerned that profit-driven practices could take their toll on the land, a process that might have already started. "I think we're already seeing that," he said. "In the last five years, with commodity prices what they've been, we've seen a lot of the native grasslands get worked up and converted to row crop production. With prices the way they are, we're not going to see a big change in the near future." Despite those concerns, Brannen said he doesn't believe the country will ever see a repeat of the conditions experienced during the Dust Bowl. "Because we do have a lot of residue management that goes on, I don't think it will ever get to that extent," he said. "And I think everybody has a heightened awareness of what did go on and what could happen, so that helps, too."



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