Agricultural Boom & Bust

“Boom and Bust” describes the linked history of both farm conservation practices and farm economics. Farm profitability boom and bust cycles affect soil, water, wildlife, farm products and communities. Federal farm commodity and conservation programs have strongly influenced farmers’ decisions for decades.

The Great Depression and Dust Bowl

Much fragile land fell under cultivation for crop income. Grasslands were converted to deeply-plowed crops. Strong wind blew topsoil across the country, destroying crops and darkening the sky. The new federal Soil Conservation Service (SCS) emerged to combat the terrible erosion and help revive the land.

1929-1940

The Soil Bank: Agricultural Act of 1956

The Soil Bank was intended to reduce surplus crops and the resulting loss of net farm income. It successfully encouraged soil conservation and the conversion of cropland to pasture, forests and wildlife habitat.

In the 50s and 60s “Farm the Best - Conserve the Rest” became a popular refrain, though taking land out of production was not popular with all.

1956

Farmers as an Economic Solution

Economists and corporate interests promoted America’s farmers as the solution to the imbalance of foreign trade revenue leading to “fencerow-to-fencerow” farming, increasing incomes.

However, over-production lowered farm income, land values suffered, erosion increased, and wildlife and clean water were severely impacted.

1970’s

Conservation Reserve Programs

Low commodity prices coupled with a severe drought led Congress to pass the Conservation Title of the 1985 Farm Bill.

It put taxpayer dollars into the popular Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), aimed to stabilize production and protect soil, water and wildlife.

Again, farmers had funding that helped them take land out of production, resulting in reduced erosion, cleaner water, and more habitat.

1980’s
NRCS Emerges

The SCS was renamed the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In the broadened role, the agency and farmers created new visions, conserved soils and more strongly favored wildlife habitat.

Modern Agricultural Trends

Chemicals used to increase production blamed for health risks to humans and animals including the decline in pollinators and butterflies.

While some farms prosper, many more disappeared. Farm size grew exponentially. Rural America struggled to maintain stable prosperity as land and water have degraded.

1990’s

2000’s

2010’s

Future Of Agriculture

Conservation Declines

Federal conservation funding declines, and farming chased favorable commodity prices.

Conservation efforts were neglected and the semi-regulatory provisions of the Farm Bill that require a base level of soil and wetland protection in return for federal farm program benefits were weakened.

Beyond Boom and Bust

It is time for constructive community conversations about successful, profitable farming that can better sustain our natural resources, farm families and rural America.

Photo Courtesy of USDA NRCS

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