

The Depression-era Dust Bowl fostered the concept of soil and water conservation districts. In many parts of the country, poor farming practices had caused some of the most productive topsoil in the world to either blow away or wash into streams in the form of polluting silt.

While Ohio did not experience a Dust Bowl, as such, some areas of the state—especially in the hilly southeast—were badly eroded as a result of antiquated farming techniques. As the soil became less and less productive, some landowners actually abandoned their farms to seek livelihoods elsewhere.

Into this bleak 1930s agricultural landscape stepped Hugh Hammond Bennett, a prominent soil scientist, who saw soil as more than mere dirt. Bennett was a friend of Ohio's pioneer conservation farmer and author Louis Bromfield. Both men viewed soil as a valuable natural resource that must be managed for preservation in much the same way as wildfire, forests and waterways must be managed. Bennett's philosophies thrust him to the forefront of a national soil conservation movement and he became the first chief of the Natural Resource Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

His ideas led to federal legislation and eventually individual state laws that created county agencies to help farmers with their soil erosion, drainage and stream pollution problems. Ohio's law was passed in 1941. Within 20 years, all 88 Ohio counties had formed locally governed districts to support farmers in the conservation and management of their soil and water resources.

Legislation passed in 1959 allowed Ohio's county soil and water conservation districts to hire staff and expand their role to other areas of resource management. Today, soil and water conservation experts continue to work at reducing soil erosion from farmlands, as well as construction sites, urban development areas and timbered woodlands. They also work with livestock and poultry farm operators to prevent manure runoff. Four hundred and forty locally elected, unpaid volunteers, serving on five members boards, oversee operations for each of Ohio's 88 soil and water conservation districts.

It used to be that 95 percent of the people in the districts worked with farmers, today they are also working with municipal leaders, developers and watershed groups.

Educating the public about nonpoint source pollution in waterways has become a major role of the county districts. Nonpoint source pollution involves water runoff from parking lots, rooftops, roadways and other fixtures of the urban and suburban landscape.

We work with people who don't have much connection with the land to show it takes the cumulative actions of many people to protect water quality.

Eighteen county districts also have received grants from the ODNR Division of Wildlife to fund wildlife specialists. These specialists offer technical assistance to farmers seeking help with wildlife-related crop, orchard or nursery damage. Landowners seeking ways to create wildlife-friendly habitats on their property also can consult these specialists for advice, as can local schools planning wildlife education classes.

Ohio's landscape has been changing and will continue to change, but the mission of county soil and water conservation districts is still that of local people working with local people to do good things for the land and water.