

FDR AND THE NEW DEAL RESPONSE TO AN ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHE

By David Woolner

Used with permission of the Roosevelt Institute

As President Obama heads to the Gulf of Mexico to inspect the miles of coastline ravaged by oil from the Deepwater Horizon blowout, he might wish to examine the federal government's response to an earlier environmental catastrophe — the drought and dust storms of the 1930s that turned major regions of the United States into what is commonly referred to as the [Dust Bowl](#).

As the generation that lived through the Great Depression will attest, the Dust Bowl was no laughing matter. The storms generated by this environmental disaster darkened cities, buried homes and farm equipment, killed livestock and represented a serious health risk. In many mid-western states, thousands of cases of what came to be known as “dust pneumonia” emerged, some of them fatal. Overall, the Dust Bowl rendered millions of acres of farmland virtually useless, left roughly half a million Americans homeless, and forced hundreds of thousands of people off the land. It also resulted in the most intense period of internal migration in American history. Between 1932 and 1940 it is estimated that 2.5 million people abandoned the plains for other regions of the country, of which some three to four hundred thousand went to California alone. Further exasperating the crisis was the fact that many of these migrants — or “Okies” as they were often called — were not welcome in the communities in which they sought a new life. The city of Los Angeles, for example, set up a “Bum Blockade” at key railroad and road junctions to try to keep the migrants out of the city; a move which reflected the more or less general perception that the migrants were socially and culturally inferior, or as Tom Joad put it in John Steinbeck's famous novel [The Grapes of Wrath](#), “Okie means you're scum.”

In response to this unprecedented crisis, the Roosevelt Administration sought not only measures to alleviate the plight of the migrants and rural poor — through the establishment and work of such agencies as the Resettlement Administration and the later Farm Security Administration — but also through measures that sought to attack the root causes of the environmental degradation that led to the creation of the disaster in the first place. Recognizing that the key issue was soil conservation, and having gained experience in this issue through his time as Governor of New York State (and as an amateur farmer and forester), FDR established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) within his first 100 days in office and the Soil Erosion Service (later the Soil Conservation Service and now the Natural Resources Conservation Service) shortly thereafter. The establishment of the Soil Erosion

Service marks the first major federal commitment to the preservation of natural resources in private hands. Even more significantly, in 1935, FDR initiated the Prairie States Forestry Project to create a “shelter belt” from the Texas Panhandle to the Canadian border. Over the course of the next seven years, the U.S Forestry Service, working in conjunction with the CCC, the newly established Works Progress Administration (WPA), and local farmers, planted nearly 220 million trees, creating over 18,000 miles of windbreaks on some 30,000 farms. The scale of this effort boggles the imagination. It literally changed the face of America and most importantly — along with the introduction of new farming techniques also initiated by the New Deal — stopped the dust storms dead in their tracks.

As [A. Dan Tarlock](#) and other environmental historians have noted, an equally significant aspect of this effort is the precedent it set for later generations. For what the New Deal efforts at “conservation” really amount to is the first major effort at what today we would call “sustainable development”: an approach toward the environment based on long-term planning. This recognizes the need create a balance between stewardship and managed exploitation and sees the federal government playing a crucial role in establishing the parameters of that balance so that future generations may enjoy a healthy and prosperous existence.

Today, as we grapple with the ecological disaster plaguing the Gulf waters and region, we would do well to recall the New Deal efforts to not only bring immediate relief to those suffering in the wake of a natural disaster, but also to bring about a long term solution to the problem. Planting millions of trees provided work for thousands and helped restore a vast area of the country into productive farmland. The conditions we face today are not all that dissimilar from those we faced in the 1930s. But the solution — a massive effort to combine our need for jobs with the pursuit of alternatives to fossil fuels and a concomitant reduction in greenhouse gasses — has so far eluded us. Perhaps the President’s visit to oil-drenched wetlands of Louisiana will change this.

David Woolner is a Senior Fellow and Hyde Park Resident Historian for the Roosevelt Institute.

<http://www.rooseveltinstitute.org/new-roosevelt/fdr-and-new-deal-response-environmental-catastrophe>