

The Dust Bowl

Grade Level: 4-8

Lesson Overview

What happens when a combination of drought, poor farming practices and high winds turns millions of acres of the Great Plains into a wasteland that kills crops, livestock and the dreams of many homesteaders?

Student Objectives

1. Explain when and where the Dust Bowl occurred.
2. Explain the causes of the Dust Bowl.
3. Identify what caused many farm families to leave their farms.
4. Identify the recovery efforts that were most responsible for ending the Dust Bowl.

Materials

- ✓ The Dust Bowl information sheet
- ✓ student worksheets:
 - The Dust Bowl
 - Dust Storm Damage of the 1930's

Vocabulary

- **climate** - average weather conditions in an area over a long period of time.
- **conservation** - preventing unnecessary loss of resources.
- **drought** - prolonged period of little or no rain.
- **Dust Bowl** - a time of widespread drought and windblown dust that affected the Southern Plains in the 1930's.
- **Great Depression** - period 1929-1940 of high unemployment in U.S.
- **migration** - movement of people or animals to another area.
- **sharecroppers** - farmers who pay their landlords a share of their crop as rent.
- **soil erosion** - the wearing away of soil by wind or water.

Procedure

After reading "The Dust Bowl" information sheet students will complete "The Dust Bowl" and "Dust Storm Damage of the 1930's" student worksheets.

Extension Activities

There are many excellent books, websites and videos on the Dust Bowl. Have students discuss whether a “Dust Bowl” could happen again.

How do they think they would have handled the stresses of this time?

Additional Resources

- Photos of the Dust Bowl:
<https://photogallery.sc.egov.usda.gov/photogallery/#/> (Dust Bowl)
- Pictures of the Dust Bowl:
<https://infosys.ars.usda.gov/WindErosion/multimedia/dustbowl/dustbowlpics.html>
- Surviving the Dust Bowl PBS American Experience Series:
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/dustbowl-chapter-1/>
- Introduction to the Dust Bowl:
<https://mpt.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/introduction-dust-bowl-video-9009/ken-burns-the-dust-bowl/>
- Boom Time:
<https://mpt.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/boom-time-dust-bowl-video-9010/ken-burns-the-dust-bowl/>
- Mechanized Agriculture:
<https://mpt.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/mechanized-agriculture-video-9025/ken-burns-the-dust-bowl/>
- The Wheat Bubble Burst:
<https://mpt.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/wheat-bubble-dust-bowl-video-9026/ken-burns-the-dust-bowl/>
- Timeline of the Dust Bowl:
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/dust-bowl-surviving-dust-bowl/>
- *The Great American Dust Bowl* by Don Brown ISBN:978-1-328-74087-8
- *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse ISBN:0-590-37125-8
- *Children of the Dust Bowl: the True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp* by Jerry Stanley ISBN-10:0517880946
- *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* by Timothy Egan ISBN-10:0618773479
- *Erosion* by Darcy Pattison ISBN 978-1629441498

Standards

Illinois Social Science Standard

SS.G.3.6-8.LC Explain how environmental characteristics impact human migration and settlement.

Illinois English Language Arts Standard

RI 3 Explain events, procedures, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text, including what happened and why, based on specific information in the text.

The **M**ultidisciplinary **A**gricultural **I**ntegrated **C**urriculum (mAGic) was created in 2004 under the leadership of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and the Facilitating Coordination in Agricultural Education Project (FCAE). Funding was made available through the FCAE grant budget from the agricultural education line item of the ISBE budget. This revision, as printed, was developed in April 2021.



These mAGic lessons are designed to bring agriculture to life in your classroom. They address the Illinois Learning Standards in math, science, English language arts and social studies.

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The Dust Bowl

Promises of cheap land and bumper harvests appeared all over the Eastern United States beginning in the 1800s. "Come to the Southern Plains!" urged magazines, newspaper ads and dozens of pamphlets. Settlers wanted! And they came by the thousands, ready to "bust the sod" of this wide-open land of promise.

The new settlers brought the farming methods they had used in the East. Little was known of the climate in their new home, but, as luck would have it, the rain was plentiful and the farms prospered. Farmers borrowed money from the bank to buy expensive new machinery. More and more of the grasslands were plowed for crops, especially wheat. Huge harvests meant low prices. To make up for the low prices, farmers plowed even the least productive land to try to grow enough to make their payments to the bank.

Then the rains stopped. In 1931, and for the next eight years, three-fourths of the United States suffered a time of very little rain, called drought. The Southern Plains, including parts of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas were hardest hit. With no trees or crops to hold the soil, hundreds of millions of tons of topsoil blew away in "black blizzards" of soil erosion. This period is known as the Dust Bowl.

Farmers plowed the fields every spring, expecting rain that didn't come. They used the same practices that had worked well in the wetter climate of the East, which only made the soil erosion worse. Great billows of wind-driven dust rose up and rolled all the way to the Atlantic Ocean, severely affecting people and animals. The weak died from pneumonia caused by breathing dust. With drought conditions and strong winds the soil not only eroded away but left the best topsoil blanketing everything that was stationary.

With no crops to sell, families couldn't pay their bills. Farmers who didn't own their land often paid their land owners with part of their crops. When the crops failed, these share-croppers were removed from their farms. The bank took away farmers' machinery when the farmers couldn't make their payments. Hungry and homeless, one-fourth of the population of the southern plains left to find work of any kind.

Talk of work in California spurred a huge migration to the West. The farmers tied all their belongings to their cars, slowly making their way down Route 66. They slept in the open, often stopping to earn a little money for food or gas. Worst of all, when they arrived in California, jobs were very scarce. Workers were paid very little, and often cheated by their bosses. Families camped in shacks with no running water or toilet facilities.

The Dust Bowl period was also the time of the Great Depression. Millions of people had no jobs. Banks and factories had closed, and many people had lost their property. The government stepped in with massive programs to create jobs and feed the hungry. Central to this recovery effort was the use of new farming methods which conserve soil and water.

By 1940, the rains returned. The conservation practices begun during the Dust Bowl years showed excellent results. The black clouds of blowing soil disappeared and the harvests were bigger than ever, just in time for a nation entering World War II.

Government programs are still important today to encourage good farming practices, assure a plentiful food supply, and protect farmers from hard times. The devastation of the Dust Bowl taught us to take care of our land and water, a lesson we will never forget.

Name _____

The Dust Bowl Worksheet

1. When and where did the Dust Bowl occur?
2. What were the main causes of the Dust Bowl?
3. What caused so many farm families to leave their farms during this time?
4. What helped bring an end to the Dust Bowl?

The Dust Bowl ANSWER KEY

1. When and where did the Dust Bowl occur?

Answer: The Dust Bowl occurred from 1931 to 1939-40, predominantly in the Southern Plains of the U.S.

2. What were the main causes of the Dust Bowl?

Answer: A period of very little rain combined with poor farming practices caused the Dust Bowl.

3. What caused so many farm families to leave their farms during this time?

Answer: Farmers had purchased land and machinery on credit during the good harvest years. When the crops failed, farmers lost their land and machinery to the bank. These homeless families heard that workers were needed in the West and went to start new lives there.

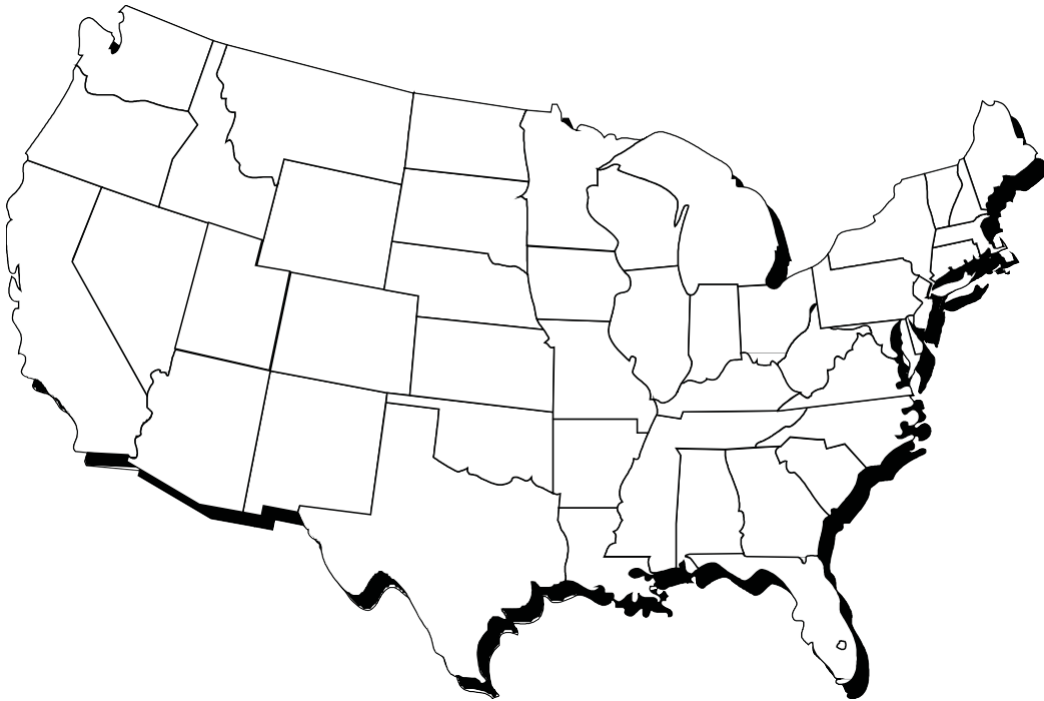
4. What helped bring an end to the Dust Bowl?

Answer: Even before the rains returned in 1940, improvements had begun. New farming methods, and education programs to teach farmers these conservation practices, greatly reduced wind and water erosion on farmland.

(Conservation practices include any of the following: Conservation tillage, strip cropping, crop rotation, contour plowing, maintaining filter strips along waterways, planting trees for wind breaks, terracing, planting cover crops, irrigation, reservoirs, and installing tile to drain excess water from fields.)

Name _____

Dust Storm Damage of the 1930's worksheet



1. Label the following states on the map. Montana, North and South Dakota, Wyoming, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas.
2. Using a yellow crayon, lightly shade in the states of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico and Colorado. Also shade in Eastern side of Wyoming, all but the NE quarter of South Dakota, the SW corner of North Dakota, and the SE corner of Montana. (You have just outlined the entire area that was damaged by the dust storms.)
3. With your brown crayon, shade in the western half of Colorado, all but the NE quarter of New Mexico, the southern half and eastern border of Texas, The eastern borders of both Kansas and Oklahoma. (You have just shaded in the Dust Bowl States.)
4. With your red crayon, color in the NE tip of New Mexico, the NW top of Texas, the panhandle (NW) part of Oklahoma, the western half of Kansas, and the SE quarter of Colorado. (You have just colored in the area most affected by the Dust Bowl.)

Dust Storm Damage of the 1930's worksheet



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Photos courtesy of USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

<https://infosys.ars.usda.gov/WindErosion/multimedia/dustbowl/dustbowlpics.html>