Topsoil's happy history lesson, Ken Burns style

Nov 15, 2012 by Pesticide Action Network

Pop quiz:

Q1: What is the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history?

Q2: What U.S. law provides the single largest source of federal funding for environmental conservation?

Answers: The Dust Bowl and the Farm Bill. And these two facts have everything to do with one another.

As Ken Burns reminds us with his new PBS documentary, The Dust Bowl, the 2012 North America Drought that has devastated farmers and ranchers from Texas to Ontario could have been much, much worse.

While this drought may yet turn out to be the most expensive in U.S. history, we have not seen — and are unlikely to see — the kinds of "black blizzards" that covered Chicago in 12 million pounds of dirt (May 1934) and moved more soil in one 24-hour period than was excavated in the creation of the Panama Canal. Topsoil in Texas and the Great Plains is largely staying put because we are farming smarter. And we are farming smarter in no small part because in June of 1933, Congress created the first version of the Farm Bill's conservation service.

The Soil Erosion Service, as it was then called (today it's the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or NRCS), immediately went to work implementing solutions such as creating terraces and drainage outlets, and rolling out new farming methods such as crop rotation. They also created the first "green payments" program to support and incentivize farmers maintaining hedgerows that mitigate against erosion, or idling cropland so that pastures and forests could be restored.

It worked. By 1938 blowing soil was reduced by 65%. And soil erosion has been further reduced since the 1990s because of the establishment of programs paying farmers to take some 35 million acres of highly erodible land out of crop production. These are the very conservation programs that we have been fighting for in the Farm Bill.

Fortunately for us, the Ken Burns documentary is set to air on PBS this Sunday and Monday, November 18 and 19 — right on the heels of today's National Farm Bill call-in day, and just in time to remind us all that, in fact, good government policy works.

Learn More » There is no more informative source on the Farm Bill than the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. If you haven't yet, check out their blog to be kept in the loop on how good policy happens.

Source URL: http://www.panna.org/blog/topsoils-happy-history-lesson-ken-burns-style