This Morton County dust storm, known as a "black blizzard," was not an unusual sight in the area during the 1930s. Drought and extensive cultivation in the southwestern part of the state contributed to Dust Bowl conditions, prompting Congress in 1937 to initiate a soil conservation program to restore the land.
OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The Morton County Land Utilization Project in the Kansas Dust Bowl

by R. Douglas Hurt

Drought and the extensive cultivation of sub-marginal lands created the Dust Bowl in the southern Great Plains during the 1930s. In January 1932 the prevailing winds began lifting the fine, powder-dry soil, unprotected by vegetative cover, into the air and created dust storms of such intensity that residents commonly referred to them as “black blizzards.” In an area with ninety-seven million acres subject to wind erosion, the Dust Bowl reached its greatest extent during the mid-1930s, when its boundary encompassed some fifty million acres. Although the Soil Conservation Service considered the western half of Kansas to be part of the Dust Bowl, by 1938 the extreme

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southwestern corner of the state contained the most drought-stricken and wind-eroded counties, and Morton County occupied the heart of the Dust Bowl.

By 1932, in addition to drought and wind erosion, wheat prices across the southern Great Plains had fallen to about one dollar per bushel, less than half the price received during World War I. In southwestern Kansas the price of wheat dropped to twenty-nine cents per bushel following the record-breaking harvest in the autumn of 1931. Farmers in Morton County, like their counterparts across the southern Great Plains, tried to recover lost income with increased production. They did so by purchasing power machinery, such as tractors, to enable them to till, seed, and harvest more acreage faster and by expanding their farm size, often by plowing grassland for wheat. In 1925 twenty-five counties in southwestern Kansas had 5.3 million acres in grass. A decade later an additional one million acres had been broken for cropland, primarily wheat. Large wheat harvests helped increase property values and tenancy, the latter for individuals who wanted to farm but who did not own land. Exploitation of the land, often by nonresidents called suitcase farmers, became the order of the day, at least until the drought killed the soil-holding grasses and wheat and until the depression-era prices drove farmers into bankruptcy and from the land. Consequently counties often increased tax rates to offset losses from declining property values and increasing tax delinquencies.

Many conservationists advocated returning much of the cropland to grass for grazing purposes, and they urged converting wheat acreage to drought-resistant forage crops such as grain sorghums. Others championed having the federal government develop a major soil conservation program to help farmers terrace, contour plow, and strip crop. Still others advocated increasing the size of farms and reducing the number of agriculturists. One of the most important and long-lasting suggestions, however, to help bring the wind erosion problem under control and contribute to economic recovery involved the federal purchase of submarginal croplands to restore that acreage to grass and return it to grazing under governmental control. In time the grass would hold the soil, and cattle would replace wheat production as the chief source of agricultural income.

In 1937 Congress initiated a soil conservation program under Title III of the Bankhead–Jones Farm Tenant Act that authorized the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to purchase and retire submarginal lands from cultivation. Specifically, Congress authorized the department to acquire, by means of voluntary sale, selected lands that had been eroded, depleted, and misused by owners who were “unable or unwilling” to maintain or restore those lands to the productive use for which they were best suited, that is, grazing. By so doing the federal government would restructure and reorganize land-holding patterns by removing the worst eroded lands for restoration and making those lands available through leasing under government supervision. Federal officials believed a controlled grazing program would help the farmers who remained to expand their operations and earn an “adequate level of living.”

The acquisition of privately owned lands would begin a massive soil conservation project that officially became known as the Land Utilization Program.

Specific areas for the federal acquisition of lands would be known as land utilization projects. The New Dealers believed the land utilization projects would provide the basis for an unprecedented experiment in soil conservation and social planning in the Dust Bowl. Significantly, New Deal social scientists based the development and implementation of the Land Utilization Program on the concept that the needs of society were superior to those of the individual. They also believed the federal government represented society and that government as an institution should help farmers use their lands wisely and provide guidance for the benefit of the general welfare.5

The foundation for land utilization projects had been laid in late 1933 when the Public Works Administration allocated twenty-five million dollars to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) for the purchase of submarginal lands, which many government officials and agricultural leaders had advocated since the 1920s. The FERA delegated responsibility for those lands to the Land Policy Section of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). This transfer marked the beginning of a checkered administrative history of land utilization projects. In May 1935 the Resettlement Administration gained responsibility for the program and in turn passed it to the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in September 1937. The FSA continued to purchase lands in designated areas through February 1943, when the land purchase program ended, except for final acquisitions to block in an area.6

Once the land utilization program had been developed and an administrative structure established, government agents had to identify the areas where severe wind erosion problems merited federal acquisition of those lands. Officials then prepared a study that analyzed the economic and social characteristics of the area, sampled local opinion about the land utilization program, designated project boundaries, and estimated purchase and restoration costs. Upon approval by the secretary of agriculture, funds became available for the project director to begin taking options to buy selected lands. Examiners appraised the land based on its value as grazing land, desirability, and comparable sales, while the values of buildings depended on their conditions and replacement costs. Options to sell land became contracts upon acceptance by the USDA. The federal government then issued a check and obtained the deed.7

In Kansas the land utilization program essentially began in 1935 when the Resettlement Administration secured options for 4,420 acres in Morton County. By 1938 the project had increased to 53,590 acres south of the Cimarron River. Insufficient funding hampered soil conservation work, however, because Congress restricted much of its allocations for emergency relief to aiding the unemployed. Concurrently, officials committed most of their time and resources to planning for a large-scale land purchase and a comprehensive soil conservation project that would affect the entire county.8

Federal planning for a land utilization project in Morton County bore fruit in April 1938 when the Farm Security Administration announced a two-phase land acquisition and soil conservation plan for 311,278 acres. Officially known as the Morton County Land Utilization and Land Conservation Project, its primary economic and social goal was "To change by public purchase existing patterns of land occupancy and land use" that had caused or was likely to cause "rural poverty, waste of public funds, and destruction of the land resources." To accomplish this broad goal, the FSA targeted 95,159 acres of "severely eroded land" for its first acquisition area. The FSA proposed to purchase 64,979 acres or 68 percent of the

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6. Ibid., 249.
7. Ibid., 250–51.
area and return 46,057 acres to grass. This area lay south and east of the Cimarron River. There nonresidents owned 44,168 acres.⁹

In this land acquisition area, 55,308 acres had been broken for cropland. Much of the land had been abandoned, and the FSA calculated that 64 percent of the farms were too small to support a family. Government officials did not offer specific gross annual income figures necessary to achieve a satisfactory standard of living, but they judged the fourteen-hundred-dollar gross average annual income of the farmers in this area to be insufficient. Given the drought and wind erosion conditions, FSA officials contended that an adequate living could not be earned from the land and that a "vast majority" of the farms in the purchase area existed only because of federal aid programs.¹⁰

In this section of Morton County, an estimated 29 percent of the area had been abandoned, and eighty farmhouses stood vacant. While many farmers had abandoned their lands, new farmers had not replaced them. As a result, abandoned fields lay exposed to the winds and the dust blew. Thus wind erosion became a menace to the farmers who remained. While these farmers tried to cultivate the land, soil drifted from abandoned fields onto occupied crop and pasturelands where farmers fought a futile battle and where an estimated ten thousand acres of dunes drifted daily. To help gain control of the land, the FSA proposed to relocate 78 of the 134 farmers in the project area. It also planned to help those who remained to shift their agricultural emphasis to the production of livestock and drought-resistant forage crops. By so doing they would end the "maladjustments" in land use, place Morton County agriculture on a "self-sustaining basis," and stop the "excessive wind erosion."¹¹

In the first phase of the Morton County Project, the FSA planned to purchase tracts too small to provide an "adequate living," misused and abandoned lands unsuited for cultivation, and wind-damaged pasturelands that had been overgrazed. The FSA also planned to acquire lands not yet blowing but which might be subject to wind erosion if improperly maintained. During fiscal 1939 the FSA wanted to obtain options for twenty-five thousand acres. Officials estimated the cropland could be purchased at prices ranging from $3.00 to $3.50 per acre, down from an average price of $22.00 per acre in 1930, while pastureland would bring only $1.00 to $2.00 per acre.¹²

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¹¹ Ibid., 17, 22, 27.
¹² Ibid., 21–22, 24, 28; Wilfred H. Pine, "100 Years of Farmland Values in Kansas," Kansas State Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin 611 (Manhattan: Kansas State University, 1977), table 2.
The FSA acknowledged “considerable oil and gas development within the project area,” but the government did not intend to buy mineral rights because land acquisition expenses would escalate beyond budget allowances. Officials, however, wanted to hold down the values of mineral rights in the project area in case the landowner wanted to “dispose” of them. By mid-February 1938, however, mineral rights sold for as high as ten dollars per acre on property adjacent to the Morton County project, and landowners became increasingly reluctant to sell their farms because they might earn lucrative returns from oil and gas wells rather than wheat production.13

On June 6 C. W. Katchin, acting chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE), which served as the official purchasing agency for the land utilization program, reported to Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace that a “considerable portion of land originally proposed for acquisition” could be acquired only at prices that he considered “unreasonable.” He noted: “It appears that the landowners have reached a common understanding to request prices for their land which are considerably in excess of appraised values. This situation is due largely to recent oil drilling activities in the area.” To meet this challenge the BAE recommended expanding project boundaries to enable the land purchase program and soil conservation work to proceed in a timely manner.14

While many landowners apparently balked because of oil and gas drilling activity in the area, the Farm Security Administration approved plans for the initial purchase and authorized agents to secure options for twenty-five thousand acres at an expenditure of ninety-five thousand dollars by June 30. The FSA also planned to let sellers retain the mineral rights so they could derive some income from the land after the sale and thereby encourage landowners to sell.15

The FSA also announced plans for a second phase of the project in April with a report that called for the purchase of a strip of land two miles wide along the Oklahoma border and seventeen miles long from the eastern boundary of the county. This area totaled 22,909 acres of which the FSA wanted to purchase 13,859 acres at an average price of four dollars per acre and return 12,501 acres to grass. The agency also classified this area as severely wind eroded with an estimated five thousand acres of sand dunes, some fifteen feet high, that “shifted day by day.” In this area, farmers averaged only two thousand dollars of gross income annually, and cash grain farming was “purely speculative.” FSA officials anticipated further abandonment of the land to “materialize shortly,” and with nonresidents owning 64 percent of the land in that area, the federal government recommended the removal of twenty-four of the forty-five farmers in that area.16

In July the FSA recommended a third phase for the Morton County project when the agency announced an even larger land purchase plan that called for acquiring 53 percent of the county. This project area lay north of the Cimarron River, and it included 246,880 acres of which 79 percent had been plowed. The expanded purchase area also included 63 percent of the abandoned cropland and 72 percent of the abandoned farms. In this section of Morton County, nonresidents controlled 78 percent of the land, or 191,399 acres.17

The FSA recommended the purchase of 232,440 acres in this area at four dollars per acre with the return of 185,045 acres to grass. Here farmers had planted 150,000 acres in wheat annually before the drought

14. Memorandum for the Secretary, June 6, 1938, Land Acquisition files.
ruined the crop in 1932. By 1938 they averaged only $1,235 in gross annual income. More than 182,600 acres lay idle or abandoned. Of the 316 farmers in this portion of the project area, 177 were suitcase farmers who had plowed 94,039 acres. Half of the farmers in the county were tenants. Although farms in this section averaged 700 acres, the FSA recommended a minimum operating unit of 1,280 acres with an emphasis on livestock and forage crop production.18

Tax and mortgage problems did not plague farmers as severely in Morton County as elsewhere in the Great Plains, primarily because the Kansas legislature provided a moratorium on the seizure of lands by counties for delinquent taxes until March 1, 1939. Even so, with 31 percent of the 1936 and 21 percent of the 1935 taxes delinquent, the FSA believed that many landowners would willingly sell their property to help clear their tax delinquencies from the county's records. Moreover, the purchase region would encourage school consolidation and save the county money.19

The Morton County Land Utilization Project, however, did not meet the approval of all residents in the county. A.F. Cyr, representative to the Kansas legislature from the 125th district and a resident of Elkhart, complained to Senator Arthur Capper on February 6, 1939, that the land purchase project had gone astray. He wrote: "The land-buying project doubtless was inspired by good intention, but good pay rolls is in the saddle now." Representative Cyr believed the land acquisition program had been mishandled and that it had become a "detriment to every man that has any interest in the county and has any intention of staying there." Cyr contended that federal officials "disregarded the promise that they made to us that no good land or land fit to farm would be purchased, and in no case would they purchase land in sufficient amount to embarrass any taxing unit." According to Cyr, federal officials had initiated a "high-pressured buying program by using propaganda to the effect that the entire county was valueless, and the people were disposing of the land as fast as possible, and that they had options on at least three-fourths of the land." In addition Cyr contended that federal agents tried to discourage as many landowners as possible from retaining ownership. He also argued that federal officials should prove they could bring the wind-eroded lands under control and thereby eliminate the "bad effects of the dust storms." Until that time the land purchase program should be terminated. By "soliciting business," project opponents also charged that the federal government made a bad economic situation worse because they drove displaced farmers onto the relief rolls of the Works Progress Administration in the nearby towns.20

In February the SCS also received a copy of a petition dated January 10, 1939, and sent to Senators Arthur Capper and Clyde M. Reed and Congressman Clifford R. Hope. It had been signed by 160 residents of Elkhart who proclaimed their "vigorous protest against the land buying program" in Morton County. They too charged that the federal government had promised only to buy submarginal and worthless land, but residents had discovered this was an "empty promise" and that federal officials now were "spotting and purchasing the better farms with good improvements, driving many owners and tenants out of the county or onto the W.P.A. rolls." The petitioners also contended that "The removal of this land from our tax rolls will force people out of the county and will . . . close the business houses of this community." They urged the senators and congressman to investigate the situation and to block all appropriations for additional land purchases. Another opponent also criticized project manager George A. At

20. A.F. Cyr to Arthur Capper, February 6, 1939, Arthur Capper Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; Riney-Kehrberg, Rooted in Dust, 146.
wood and engineer H. Cott for mismanaging the project from a "business and political standpoint." He complained to Hugh Hammond Bennett, director of the Soil Conservation Service, and questioned "the sincerity of these men as Democrats and followers of the Administration's policies."  

The Kansas congressional delegation and state representatives received other letters that protested the removal of productive lands from private use and the reduction of the tax base in Morton County. Some even charged that the worst wind erosion occurred on project lands while the farmers in the county essentially had gained control of their blowing lands. Instead of buying land, these critics contended, the federal government should pay farmers "sufficient money for listing and planting." If it had done so when the wind erosion problems began in the county, the dust storms could have been ended long ago. Instead, Morton County had been "interfered with by possibly well-meant, but destructively resulting governmental efforts." Surprisingly, even county agent Z.W. Johnson opposed the land utilization project. He also charged that project officials purchased the best lands to "freeze out the others." In addition, they tried to give nonresident owners the impression that the banks were selling their lands to show that the county was in a "hopeless condition." Moreover, the declining tax base and the significant population loss threw a "double load upon the few who have remained." According to Johnson, the federal government seemed to be working against the best interests of the people in Morton County.  

Not everyone in Morton County, however, objected to the land utilization project. Ray Jackson, vice president of the Southwest Agricultural Association, called the opposition to the Morton County project "ridiculous" and nothing more than a "tempest in a teapot," because project director George A. Atwood made it clear that the government would return any optioned land that the community did not want purchased. Jackson placed the blame for the opposition with several businessmen who feared that the land purchase program would remove all farmers from the county and that their livelihoods would be placed in jeopardy. The editor of the Garden City Daily Telegram also supported the Morton County Land Utilization Project, particularly to remove farmers who did not practice soil conservation. He adamantly contended that farmers who cultivated submarginal lands "must be driven out" to make way for "conscientious, cooperating" farmers. Similarly the editor of the Elkhart Tri-State News in Morton County doubted the wisdom of any large-scale plan to reseed the wind-eroded lands in grass, but he called the project "commendable." Moreover, most Morton County landowners supported the project because it gave them an opportunity to profit from acreages that they could not make productive.  

E.M. Dean, a local abstractor who had a vested interest in the program, reported to the Soil Conservation Service in late June 1939 that its workers were taking care of project lands in a satisfactory manner. Dean believed that if the government would purchase half of the county "the land left in private ownership would be worth more money than all of it is now." Moreover, he affirmed that nonresidents and mortgage and insurance companies owned much of the land in the project area. He also reported that most objections to the land purchase program came from "residents of the villages, office holders, people on relief and suit-case farmers" rather than from people who had attempted to establish homes in the county during the past half century. Dean contended the federal government could save money with the land purchase program and thereby end "the present expensive and inefficient farm set-up, which in reality makes the tenant farm for bounty rather than for
The farmland above, one mile south of Wilburton in Morton County, was photographed in 1938. The plot had been purchased by the Soil Conservation Service in 1935 and planted in sorghum to produce good soil cover. It stands in sharp contrast to, but originally looked the same as, the abandoned plot shown below, which was photographed on the same day from the same location, but facing the opposite direction. This land had not been planted with ground cover and had suffered a soil loss by wind erosion of approximately four feet during a dust storm.

The crop. As long as agriculturists could rely on price supports and crop loans, such as those provided by the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, to guarantee an income, Dean believed they would give more attention to farming the government than to cultivating the land in a proper manner.

Neither the Soil Conservation Service nor the USDA chose to use Dean’s argument of fiscal responsibility to win support for the land acquisition program. Benefit payments from the AAA were too politically important to sacrifice as an efficiency measure to gain support for the program. At the same time, the federal government did not have enough resources to support crop reduction and other agricultural programs and still commit to a massive land acquisition and soil conservation program. Despite inadequate funding, however, by mid-July 1938 project officials reported that the land acquisition program was proceeding satisfactorily and that opposition by landowners had largely been overcome by offering a “reasonable price,” that is, about four dollars per

acre, with some farmers receiving five dollars per acre. Some insurance companies even willingly accepted less to be rid of a liability. In August 1938, for example, the Central Life Assurance Society sold 160 acres of unoccupied land to the project for $3.61 per acre. Even so, many landowners were reluctant to sign options because they believed actual payment would not be made for one or two years. Although they supported the project they wanted their money immediately. Ted Smith, the acting regional director, urged the SCS to make a few purchase payments and secure some abstracts to expedite the process and improve negotiations for land acquisition.25

In reality, opposition to the project had less to do with mismanagement and betrayal of administration policies than with good weather. Indeed, the return of near normal precipitation throughout most of the Dust Bowl was the real reason for opposition to the Morton County project. As early as October 1937 ten days of the best rainfall in seven years convinced many residents in western Kansas that the drought had been broken. Farmers in Morton County anticipated a bumper crop of sorghum, kafir corn, maize, and hegari, crops that they believed "thrive on the semi-arid prairies if given an occasional shower." With the return of moisture and the Kansas legislature's recent approval of a model federal statute that authorized the creation of soil conservation districts, their optimism reportedly had reached a "high pitch," and they were convinced that with a little help from nature most of the Dust Bowl could be turned into profitable farm land. By mid-February 1939 the prospects for a good winter wheat crop were the best since the drought became severe in 1932, and the weather continued to improve. In May 1939 Morton County received nearly ten inches of rain, and December brought eighteen inches of snow. Twelve more inches fell in January 1940. The county agent spoke for most residents when he said, "Morton County can no longer be called the Dust Bowl."26

Despite widespread support for the land utilization project, the petition and other complaints to the Kansas congressional delegation brought results. On February 17, 1939, Hugh Bennett temporarily suspended the land purchase program for Morton County and ordered regional officials to make a complete investigation of the local opposition to the program. SCS officials working in Morton County also had other reasons to worry about the project. By the summer of 1938 local officials reported that drought and wind-erosion conditions were so severe that many operators planned to abandon their lands. Further abandonment of croplands would present a wind erosion menace not only to the operators who remained in the area but also to the lands being acquired by the federal government. As a result the SCS planned to expand the project by 13,859 acres at an estimated cost of $40,000. This acquisition would bring the total purchase area to 232,440 acres at an estimated cost of $939,760.27

Plans for acquiring such a large area at a relatively high cost proved little more than wishful thinking by project officials. In August 1938 the budget for acquisition in Morton County was reduced from $187,350 to $174,365, which would enable officials to purchase only approximately 46,999 acres. Inadequate funding continued to plague the project. By mid-December project officials planned to spend only $23,225 for removing farm buildings and fences, chiseling, blank listing, and dune and drift leveling as well as seeding croplands to grass. At that time, however, only 49,120 acres had been approved for purchase by the secretary of agriculture, and options had been taken on only 20,189 acres. With the land

purchase and development costs now estimated at $4.49 and $5.29 per acre, respectively, the project in reality would be far less than the theoretical plans formulated around a conference table.28

Funds always proved insufficient to accomplish the recommended plans, and the acreage purchased totaled far less than originally planned. By late August 1939 the federal government had acquired only 55,363 acres, although it had obtained options for an additional 50,571 acres. Soil Conservation Service employees had planted more than 17,000 acres of severely eroded land to sorghum to provide a soil-holding cover crop, but "adequate stabilization" had been achieved on only 11,000 acres. By this time only 140 acres had been seeded to native grasses, primarily because soil blowing readily killed the young seedlings. Moreover, only thirty-six farmsteads and seventy miles of fence had been removed, and government officials reported that the odds against stabilization were great unless the entire area could be brought under "one control or close cooperation." On the eve of World War II, about 96,000 acres had been purchased, and when the land utilization project essentially terminated in 1943, only about 107,000 acres had been acquired.29

Other problems also plagued the Morton County Land Utilization Project. No one, for example, including the officials in the Soil Conservation Service, knew how to go about restoring the wind eroded lands on such a grand scale. In addition, while the SCS had provided important advice concerning tillage techniques and cropping patterns at its land demonstration projects on private lands since its founding in 1935, no one knew how much time would be required to reseed thousands of acres to grass on the Great Plains and bring the blowing lands under control. Certainly a considerable amount of work had to be conducted to restore the lands to grass. Buildings and fences had to be removed to enable the dust drifts to be leveled. Croplands had to be contour listed, terraced, and planted in row crops to begin holding the blowing soil. Sand dunes had to be leveled by using heavy equipment as well as the prevailing winds. Moreover, no one knew precisely which varieties of grass seeds should be used or in what combinations. As a result some experts estimated that fifty years might be necessary to return the land utilization projects to grasslands.30

The Morton County Land Utilization Project provides an excellent example of the problems that the SCS confronted on the Great Plains. There the semiarid climate provided an average annual precipitation of only 16.6 inches, little more than the 10-inch maximum for desert conditions. This precipitation average fell below the twenty inches necessary for cropland production without the use of the summer fallow technique whereby wheat fields are plowed but left unplanted every other year to store subsoil moisture. About three-fourths of that precipitation fell from April through September and nourished the sand bluestem, blue grama, side oats grama, and buffalo grass that grew in the area naturally. With 70 percent of the days sunny and the wind velocity averaging fifteen miles per hour, however, moisture evaporation from the soil remained high throughout the year and increased the potential for dust storms on lands not protected by permanent vegetation. In addition, the soils in Morton County primarily are a sandy loam. These wind-deposited soils have relatively little organic matter, clay, or silt to help resist the wind, and they blow easily. The task of the Soil Conservation Service was to restore the blowing cropland to grass, improve or maintain its productive capacity, and return the land to sound agricultural productivity under the careful management of the federal government, all under unfavorable conditions.31

29. United States Department of Agriculture Conference Tour, Southern Great Plains, August 26-September 3, 1939, Prairie States Forestry Project, ibid.
The first task of the SCS on the Morton County project was to achieve temporary stabilization of the blowing land. The cropland had to be listed so that the deep furrows would catch the moving soil at ground level, while drought resistant sorghum crops, particularly black amber cane, broom corn, and sudan grass would help slow the wind and help keep the cropland from blowing. These cover crops would be mowed at a height of about twelve inches after they had headed and the stubble left on the ground. Native grasses would then be planted between the rows. The SCS also permitted natural weed growth, especially Russian thistles, to help hold the particularly sandy soils that could not be tilled and planted with a cover crop without risking additional wind damage. This work, together with the return of near normal precipitation by 1940, enabled the SCS to achieve temporary stabilization of the "blow area," with the exception of about one thousand acres.  

To reseed native grasses, the SCS experimented with a variety of seedbed techniques from 1939, when the first permanent grasses were planted, through 1945. These experiments also proved that the best mixtures of grasses for sandy lands were blue grama, sand love grass, sideoats grama, little bluestem, and sand bluestem, while blue grama, sideoats grama, and buffalo grasses grew best on hard lands. Shortages of bluestem and sideoats grama seed, however, usually necessitated a mixture primarily composed of blue grama, buffalo grass, and sand love seed for both sandy and hard lands. The SCS also discovered that western wheat grass, crested wheat grass, and Canadian wild rye proved excellent for establishing a ground cover, and agency employees seeded these grasses extensively during the autumn. The SCS prohibited grazing on the reseeded lands from three to seven years after planting to ensure the development of a good stand of grass.  

The work proceeded slowly. By 1943 only twenty-five hundred acres had been planted to grass in fields with sorghum cover crops. Both inadequate supplies of grass seeds and insufficient funds continued to slow the reseeding work. Still the SCS could measure its progress by the amount of land seeded in grass and the apparent reduction in wind erosion. As a result, in 1943 the SCS permitted grazing on the lands where 150 farmers once had tilled their fields. With more than two hundred miles of new fencing dividing project lands into pastures, and with the use of eight wells, the SCS closely monitored and controlled the renewed grazing and gave a favorable report to the state of project lands. The wells, for example, were located so that the cattle did not travel more than one and one-half miles for water, and more wells were planned to cut that distance in half, with each well capable of supporting one hundred head of cattle for at least five days. In May a five-month grazing season began. Later the SCS extended the season through October, although the agency remained flexible in deciding annual conditions. On May 29, 1944, sixteen cattlemen organized the Morton County Grazing Association. The association then leased land from the federal government, and the SCS monitored its grazing practices. The grazing association also assumed responsibility for maintaining windmills, wells, and fences and for distributing salt to the cattle.  

Although the federal government terminated land purchases in 1943, it continued to exchange lands with nearby owners to block in the project area. These exchanges usually occurred where a tract of government land was surrounded by private lands or where private lands were encircled by federal lands. In these cases the federal government and landowners often arranged to exchange acreage to enable the federal government to maintain a continuous peripheral boundary for the project.  

In retrospect the federal government did not intend the land utilization program to be the sole remedy for the severe wind erosion and agricultural economic problems on the Great Plains. The land utilization program, like the Prairie States
Forestry Project, was not a panacea to solve all problems in the region. Rather, land utilization projects were part of a broad plan to bring wind-eroded and damaged lands under control, demonstrate proper soil conservation techniques, and reorganize farm operations so families no longer would rely on production of wheat from submarginal lands. In addition, the land acquisition program provided needed funds to families during a time of severe economic crisis. Yet even in this respect, the land utilization program was only one of many economic relief programs. From the establishment of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration in May 1933 through mid-September 1937, Morton County farmers received $1,838,865 in federal aid from Rural Rehabilitation, Emergency Crop, and Agricultural Credit Corporation loans as well as payments from the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Civil Works Administration, Works Progress Administration, Resettlement Administration, and Federal Emergency Relief Administration. When loans from the Federal Land Bank and Production Credit Association are included, the grants in aid from government subsidies totaled $2,375,712. Morton County families also received some support from the Kansas Emergency Relief Committee. Those funds, however, were even more limited than federal support, and they contributed only $729 to Morton County relief efforts from February to July 1933 when federal aid superseded state relief efforts.36

Certainly by purchasing approximately 107,000 acres, valued at $415,000, the federal government removed 20 percent of the land from the tax base. This acreage represented 9 percent of the land valuation for the county. One township lost 65 percent of its taxable acreage and 50 percent of its tax base by valuation. But with county tax delinquencies high, particularly in the land purchase area, the Morton County government did not experience an immediate loss. Moreover, these losses were offset by the reduction in the costs of public services. In 1937 Congress also addressed the problem of tax losses with Title III of the Bankhead–Jones Farm Tenant Act by requiring the federal government to return 25 percent of the revenues from project lands to the affected counties to help support the maintenance of schools and roads. This action helped lessen the opposition to the land use program.37


Although federal officials had intended to help farm families who had sold their lands or tenants who lost their homes relocate in "subsistence homestead communities," this aspect of the land utilization projects failed. Originally owners and tenants on the Morton County project lands were to be resettled on federal lands in the Mississippi Delta. Inadequate funding and planning plagued this aspect of the project from the beginning, and it quickly was forgotten in Morton County. There the SCS devoted its time and money to land acquisition and soil conservation while those who sold their lands moved to nearby towns or out of the area. Although the resettlement aspect of the project failed, it did not damage the land utilization program in Morton County.38

The SCS successfully used the land utilization program to help stabilize the most severely eroded lands and reduce soil blowing. By taking submarginal lands out of crop production and retiring that acreage to grass, it helped improve the agriculture practices of the county through controlled grazing practices. Certainly the land utilization project was not capable of solving all agricultural, economic, and social problems in Morton County, but as part of a broad soil conservation program that included the Prairie States Forestry Project, the organization of soil conservation districts, and other demonstration work and technical and economic aid to farmers, it played an instrumental role in helping reduce wind erosion in the Dust Bowl.

The SCS continued to work on the Morton County Land Utilization Project until November 2, 1953, when Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson transferred the project to the Forest Service. And on June 20, 1960, the USDA created nineteen national grasslands from twenty-two land utilization projects in eleven western states. At that time, the Morton County project became the Cimarron National Grasslands. It remains a landmark to an unprecedented experiment in state planning and soil conservation to gain control of the environment in the Kansas Dust Bowl.39
