

Hugh Hammond Bennett and the Creation of the Soil Erosion Service

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SUMMARY

The Soil Conservation Service (SCS) was created in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) by an act of Congress on April 27, 1935. However, an earlier date, September 19, 1933 should not pass without recognition. That date marks the selection of Hugh Hammond Bennett as the director of the Soil Erosion Service (SES), predecessor to SCS.¹ Creation of the Soil Erosion Service was critical to the future of Federal soil conservation activities, the history of SCS, and Bennett's recognition as the "father of soil conservation."

This paper discusses Bennett's USDA career, which made him the logical candidate to lead the Federal soil conservation effort, and recounts the summer of 1933 when the New Deal included soil conservation as a purpose for public works programs. During June to September 1933, several agencies put forth plans to utilize the public works funds to be devoted to soil conservation. It was by no means certain that the architects of the New Deal would favor Bennett's plan over its competitors. Bennett's selection as the Director of SES, while logical, was not a foregone conclusion.

BENNETT'S EARLY CAREER

Bennett earned a Bachelor of Science degree with an emphasis in chemistry and geology from the University of North Carolina in June 1903 and upon graduating joined the Bureau of Soils within the USDA. The Bureau had begun to make county based soil surveys in 1899, which became regarded as an important American contribution to the field of soil science. The

outdoor work suited Bennett, and he mapped soils and wrote a number of soil surveys.

The 1905 survey of Louisa County, Virginia, in particular, profoundly affected Bennett. He had been directed to the county to investigate declining crop yields. As he compared virgin, timbered sites to eroded fields, he became convinced that soil erosion was a problem not just for the individual farmer but also for rural economies. While this experience aroused his curiosity, Bennett recalled that Thomas C. Chamberlain's paper on *Soil Wastage* presented in 1908 at the Governors' Conference in the White House that "fixed my determination to pursue that subject to some possible point of counteraction."²



Hugh Hammond Bennett

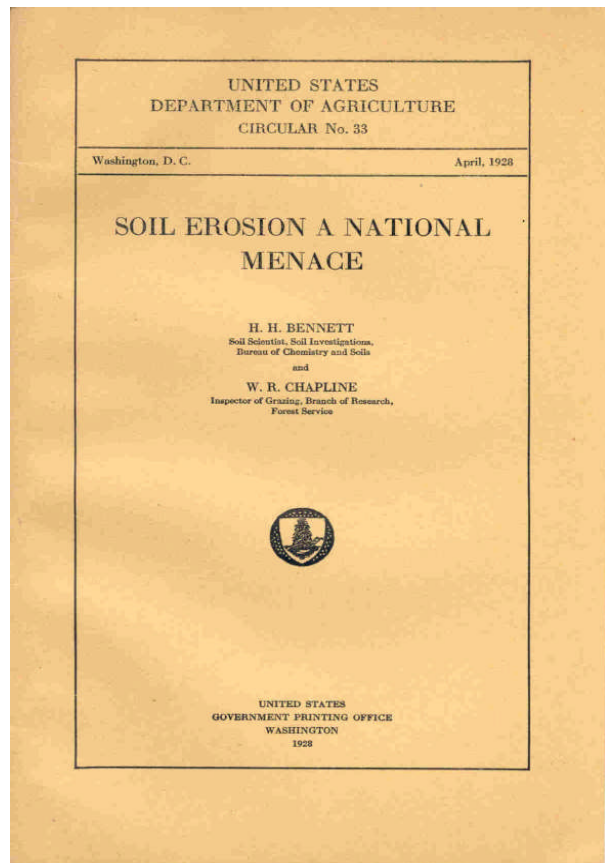
Bennett wrote increasingly about soil erosion in the 1920s for an array of popular and scientific journals such as *North American Review*, *Country Gentleman*, *Scientific Monthly*, and the *Journal of Agricultural Research*. He was establishing himself as the USDA expert on soil erosion and was recognized as such. His campaign received quite a boost, when Henry G. Knight, Chief of the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils, placed Bennett in charge of a special study of the extent of soil erosion and methods of control, effective January 1928.

Bennett's travels around the country and studies provided grist for his articles and talks. He succeeded in arousing national attention where others had failed. Among his writings of the 1920s, none was more influential than a 1928 USDA bulletin coauthored with William Ridgely Chapline titled *Soil Erosion: A National Menace*. Bennett expressed the motivation for his later actions: "The writer, after 24 years spent in studying the soils of the United States, is of the opinion that soil erosion is the biggest problem confronting the farmers of the Nation over a tremendous part of its agricultural lands." The bulletin was not a manual on the methods of preventing soil erosion; rather it was intended to draw attention "to the evils of this process of land wastage and to the need for increased practical information and research work relating to the problem."³

Bennett followed up momentum gained from the bulletin and well-placed magazine articles with a campaign for a national soil erosion program. He knew the few soil erosion researchers at the state agricultural experiment stations. Important as their investigations were, the experiments covered only a few spots on the vast agricultural landscape. In Bennett's mind a national program of soil erosion was needed. Bennett's ally in cause, A. B. Connor of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, enlisted the aid of Representative James Buchanan, who inserted a clause in the USDA appropriations bill for fiscal year 1929-1930

that authorized the soil experiment stations. (Eventually the stations would be renamed soil conservation experiment stations.)

Bennett was disappointed that some of the funds were allotted to the Forest Service and the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering (BAE). Despite this disappointment he sought out locations and cooperating states who usually contributed the use of land for the stations. He designed much of the research program and supervised the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils researchers at the experiment station. Bennett's new position was "in charge [of], soil erosion and moisture conservation investigations," when the New Deal administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) arrived in Washington, D.C.⁴



A PUBLIC WORKS PROGRAM TO STIMULATE THE ECONOMY

FDR and the architects of the New Deal acted early in the administration to provide work for the unemployed through federally funded projects. Coincidental to providing employment, these wages would prime the local economic pump; and, it was hoped, bring the country out of the economic depression. The public works legislation identified soil conservation as one of its purposes. Roosevelt was inaugurated on March 4, 1933 and on March 21st he proposed to Congress that they create "a civilian conservation corps to be used in simple work, not interfering with normal employment, and confining itself to forestry, the prevention of soil erosion, flood control and similar projects."⁵

Congress passed the Emergency Conservation Work legislation on March 31, 1933. As the Federal agencies sorted out their responsibilities the Forest Service in the USDA assumed general supervision of a small number of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps that worked on soil conservation. Prior to the creation of the Soil Conservation Service in 1935, the CCC worked predominantly on public forest and park lands.

The CCC addressed only a segment of the unemployed, young men aged 18 to 25; consequently there remained the need for a broader public works program. The Federal Emergency Relief Act (May 12, 1933) provided direct relief to states. Meanwhile, the Cabinet and "Brain Trust" – FDR's personal advisors – continued crafting a Federal public works bill. Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, had suggested to FDR that conservation of natural resources be among the objectives of the bill. He confided the following in his diary on May 16:

I made two suggestions as to this bill which met with the approval of the President. The first was that there be a definite revision made to include conservation of natural resources among the objects of the bill; and the other was instead of appointing an independent Public Works Administrator, the new official be assigned to some department.⁶



President Franklin Roosevelt visited with CCC enrollees near Camp Roosevelt on August 12, 1933, at Big Meadows, Skyline Drive, Virginia. Seated from left are Maj. Gen. Paul B. Malone, Louis M. Howe, Harold L. Ickes, Robert Fechner, FDR, Henry A. Wallace, and Rexford Tugwell.

Henry A. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, discussed potential public works projects with some of his staff. On May 30th, he advised Samuel H. McCrory, Chief of the BAE, that he had talked to the President "about the matter of getting some of the public works money for erosion control. The president seems to be very much interested in the general problem of erosion but time did not permit getting any detailed views from him as to action under the public works bill." ⁷

Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), enacted on June 16, created the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works. All powers of the new administration were to be exercised by the Federal Emergency Administrator of Public Works, who could establish new agencies, utilize Federal and state employees, and appoint employees without regard to civil service laws. In keeping with the Ickes suggestion, FDR appointed the Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior (USDI), to the dual post of Federal Emergency Administrator of Public Works on July 8th.⁸ Among the eligible purposes enumerated in the act were the "conservation and development of natural resources, including control, utilization, and purification of waters, prevention of soil or coastal erosion, development of water power..."⁹

It seems likely that FDR needed little persuasion to include soil conservation as a purpose of the Act given his interest in forestry, erosion, and conservation. He had carried out reforestation and soil conservation work on his estate at Hyde Park, New York, and on his small farm near Warm Springs, Georgia. As governor of New York, FDR had hired some of the state's youth to reforest abandoned farm land purchased by the State. His personal life and public career indicate that not only would he be receptive to the idea, but also that he would have arrived at that thought independently.



Henry Agard Wallace

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Prints & Photographs Division, Library of
Congress

Within the USDA, some bureaus were already thinking about public works projects that could be funded under the bill then being drafted and making its way through Congress. Before the bill was signed, the BAE had formulated a plan for a national terracing program for erosion control. The BAE proposed that it supply the technical direction, while the State administrators in the new public works agency would administer the program and employ a supervising engineer for each State. The Federal government would supply the terracing equipment while the farmer signed an agreement to provide the labor, power, and future maintenance. The state extension services could help farmers form cooperating organizations to facilitate the agreement process. Rexford G. Tugwell, acting for Secretary Wallace, forwarded the plan to the Administrator, Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works

on June 9. Secretary Wallace had penned a note on the outgoing letter. "I have had this matter of expenditure of Public Works money for erosion control [brought] up with the President and he is very much interested."¹⁰

JOHN COLLIER AND CULTURAL PLURALISM ON THE RESERVATIONS

Simultaneously, another USDA branch was cooperating with the Department of the Interior on soil conservation. The Bureau of Chemistry and Soils and their soil conservation expert, Hugh Hammond Bennett, had come to the attention of John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, through Secretary of Agriculture Wallace. Wallace soon had plans for Mr. Bennett to use his conservation skills to help Collier in his mission to preserve and perpetuate Native American cultures.

Before the New Deal, Collier was active in Indian affairs and had been critical of Federal Indian policy and the Office of Indian Affairs. He was a potential candidate to be Commissioner of Indian Affairs, but so too was Harold Ickes. During the presidential campaign, Ickes had sought support among fellow progressive Republicans for FDR and aspired to be Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Collier and others persuaded him to seek the Cabinet post of Secretary of the Department of the Interior. Collier, perhaps the leading advocate for reform of government policies toward Tribes, wanted to lead the Office of Indian Affairs himself. Ickes was certainly sympathetic toward the Tribes, but Collier regarded him as too inexperienced in the area and temperamentally unsuited to the job of reform.¹¹

Collier's selection as Commissioner of Indian Affairs revolutionized government policy toward Tribes. For most of the late 19th and early 20th century, Indian policy promoted assimilation into American society. Collier's experiences, especially an epiphany at Taos Pueblo, converted him to cultural pluralism in which Tribes perpetuated and strengthened their unique cultures. Retaining their land base and

economic viability was critical to the success of cultural pluralism in Collier's view.¹²

In viewing the potential for the reservations to support a viable livelihood, Collier and Ickes focused first on the Navajo reservation for some obvious reasons. The 16 million acre reservation was about one-fourth of the acreage in all reservations, and the Navajo were one-sixth of the native population of the United States.¹³ The Navajo had adapted their economy and culture to the sheep, goat, and horse introduced by the Europeans. After the Navajo release from captivity at Bosque Redondo and Fort Sumner and their resettlement in New Mexico, the U.S. Government supplied about 15,000 sheep and goats and distributed food, seed, and implements. From 1870 to the beginning of World War II, the Navajo population grew from around 10,000 to 50,000. Their livestock increased from a few thousand to more than a million at times and the reservation was expanded from 3.5 to 16 million acres. By the 1930s many familiar with the Western range, including the Navajo reservation, thought it had suffered land degradation from periods of overstocking.¹⁴

HUGH HAMMOND BENNETT AND COOPERATION OF BUREAU OF CHEMISTRY AND SOILS WITH THE OFFICE OF INDIAN AFFAIRS

John Collier's eldest son and assistant in the Office of Indian Affairs, Charles W. Collier, took on the mission of identifying the people to be consulted on conserving and rehabilitating the reservation lands.¹⁵ Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace suggested cooperation with Hugh Hammond Bennett and others in the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils.

On or before May 24, 1933, an employee of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, probably Charles Collier, met with Bennett, W. Ridgley Chapline of the U. S. Forest Service and Frank Craighead of the Bureau of Entomology, and sought their advice concerning erosion problems on the

reservations. According to Collier's notes, Bennett believed erosion on the Dakota reservation could be "economically controlled," and offered to send George W. Musgrave, director of the erosion experiment station at Clarinda, Iowa, to investigate and make recommendations. Concerning Oklahoma, Collier reported that Bennett "believes that it would be very profitable to undertake erosion control in almost unlimited amounts." Bennett recommended H. G. Lewis, director of the Red Plains Soil Erosion Experiment Station at Guthrie, Oklahoma, and endorsed even more strongly, Dr. Nathaniel E. Winters of the Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station. Winters was a State, not a Federal employee, but Bennett thought it might be feasible to get him assigned to the Federal project. Winters, a Kansan, had the added advantage of partial Indian ancestry.

The complement of erosion experiment stations that Bennett supervised did not include a southwestern station, and the group discussed the possibility of establishing one. The idea of an experiment station would find favor with the Office of Indian Affairs group. After the meeting Bennett departed for a five-day fieldwork trip and his supervisor, Dr. A. G. McCall, chief of Soil Investigations in the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils, wired Musgrave and Lewis to prepare for travel to the reservations.¹⁶

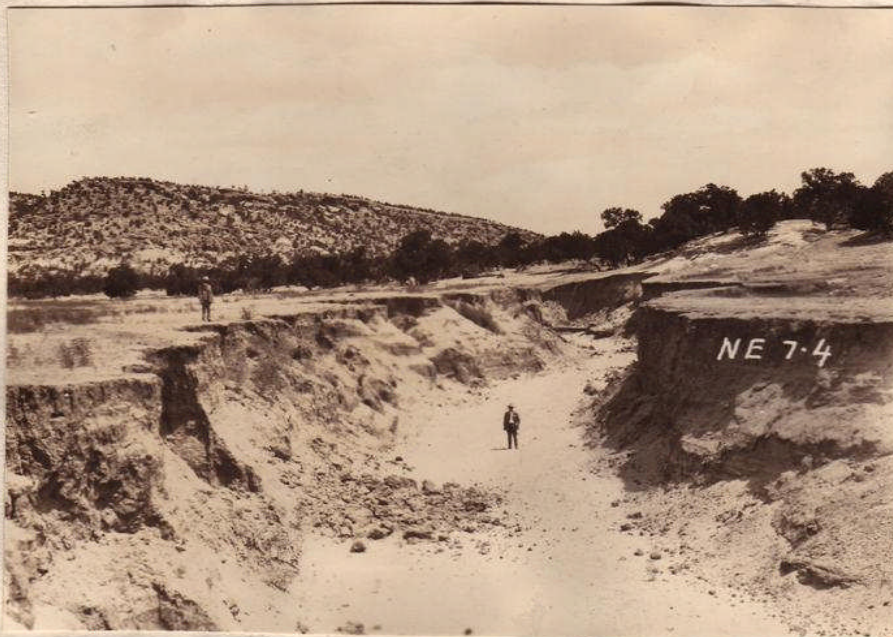
DISCUSSIONS ABOUT SOIL CONSERVATION ON THE NAVAJO RESERVATION

Prior to asking Secretary Wallace to arrange a meeting of the primary parties in USDA and USDI, the Office of Indian Affairs met with Bennett and McCall several times. Wallace called on Henry G. Knight, Chief of the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils. Knight held the meeting in his office on June 8th, and it included John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Charles W. Collier, Assistant to the Commissioner, and Jay B. Nash, Special Assistant to the Indian Commissioner. Attending from the USDA were Knight, McCall, and Bennett of the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils. Attending

from the BAE were Samuel H. McCrory, Chief, and Lewis A. Jones, Division of Drainage and Soil Erosion Control. William Ridgely Chapline, who had coauthored *Soil Erosion: a National Menace* with Bennett, and who was in charge of range land investigations for the Forest Service, also attended.

At the meeting Collier and colleagues expressed an interest in developing a research station to study erosion problems on reservations in the Southwest. This idea probably developed from the earlier discussions with Bennett and others. For this reason, Bennett, with his experience setting up the soil erosion experiment stations, was a logical collaborator. Additionally, Collier saw the station as an educational center to which Navajos would travel for instruction in soil conservation methods. Knight understood the objective would be to develop "local leadership among the Indians themselves." The group decided that a team of representatives from the Office of Indian Affairs and USDA would meet at Harvey Hotel, Gallup, New Mexico on June 26 to study the conditions, especially the areas of eroding land. The group would select tracts where various known control measures would be utilized.

The Bureau of Chemistry and Soils, at the request of the Office of Indian Affairs, assumed leadership of the project and Bennett was made chairman of the committee.¹⁷ Importantly, the proposed cooperation had the enthusiastic support of Secretary of Agriculture Wallace. He responded to Knight's report on the meeting. "Thanks for your prompt and thoroughgoing cooperation with Commissioner Collier and his associates. This work has my very great interest and it is a pleasure to see how you have responded to the suggestion of cooperation."¹⁸ John Collier cleared the plan with Secretary Ickes, who was "powerfully interested" and Collier expressly asked that Bennett serve as "informal chairman of this composite groups."¹⁹



*Distructive erosion on the road to Crown Point
from Gallup. Eastern Navajo Indian Reservation*



*Young arroyo showing how erosion undermines
the walls and how large pieces break off. Zuni Indian
Reservation.*

Photographs attached to "Report of the Conservation Advisory Committee for the Navajo Reservation, July 2, 1933."

Late in June 1933, the committee met at the Navajo Reservation. Bennett represented the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils. C.E. Ramser, Senior Drainage Engineer, represented the BAE. Ramser also had researched and written on terracing and gully control techniques. Representing the Forest Service was C.K. Cooperrider from the Southwestern Forest and Range Experiment Station, who was also in charge of the erosion and streamflow research.

During the brief tour Bennett noted observations in his field diary about range conditions, erosion, and grazing by goats and sheep. Bennett met the people knowledgeable about reservation conditions and collected oral tradition stories about changes in land conditions and the names of other contacts that could be helpful. Some of these people such as E.A. Johnson, forester for the Office of Indian Affairs at Albuquerque, would later work with SCS on the range program. Bennett noted citations for further reading such as the works of anthropologist Alfred Louis Kroeber and *Ancient Life in the American Southwest* by Edgar Lee Hewett. Toward the end of the trip when he was no doubt looking forward to writing the committee report, Bennett stated what he termed "The Problem," in his field diary, "We find that the Navajo Indian Reservation has suffered so seriously from overgrazing that range areas now have little present value."²⁰

NAVAJO TRIBAL COUNCIL APPROVES EXPERIMENT STATION

John Collier called a meeting of the Navajo Tribal Council at Fort Wingate on July 7 and 8, toward the end of Bennett's trip. It was Collier's first appearance before the Council as Commissioner of Indian Affairs. The reformer and outside critic was now center stage at the meeting of the Council and another 1,200 Navajo Tribal members. Indian Service officials from the Southwest and Washington, who had previously been the objects of Collier's criticism, attended. Collier's primary objective for his first meeting with the Council was approval of the experiment station. Bennett spoke to

the Council and emphasized the erosion that had taken place and the need for experiments and education.²¹

The next day, July 8, the Council approved the government's selecting a representative area for the "Erosion Control Station." The resolution stated that "unless sound plans for the control of this erosion are developed and carried into practice without further delay, the greater portion of the reservation will be damaged beyond repair."²² After approval, CCC crews started fencing the area at Mexican Springs almost immediately. Bennett had chaired the committee that wrote the report on the conservation work needed on the reservation. The committee report became the blueprint for the action program that Collier proposed to Secretary Ickes.

ASSISTANCE TO OTHER INDIAN RESERVATIONS

While Bennett traveled to the Navajo reservation, some of his experiment station superintendents traveled to other reservations and wrote reports to the Office of Indian Affairs on the erosion conditions and needed conservation methods. George W. Musgrave, superintendent of the Clarinda, Iowa station surveyed the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations. Musgrave explained that the reservations were "so large and the problems so diverse that a minimum of several days seems necessary to do anything like an adequate job." Musgrave assured the Office of Indian Affairs staff that the entire soil survey division staff, including director A. G. McCall, were interested and would "endeavor to give to you the very best possible service."²³

J. M. Snyder superintendent of the erosion experiment station at Statesville, North Carolina, wrote a report on erosion conditions on the Cherokee reservation.²⁴ H.G. Lewis of the Guthrie, Oklahoma station was an advisor on the Indian Civil Conservation Corps camps in Oklahoma. He wrote a technical bulletin "Emergency Conservation Soil Erosion Control Work on Indian Lands in Oklahoma." The request

from John Collier was giving McCall, Bennett and the experiment station superintendents an opportunity to achieve one of their objectives, seeing that their research findings were utilized.

ALLOTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS FUNDS FOR SOIL CONSERVATION

Ickes, acting in his capacity as Federal Emergency Administrator of Public Works, allotted \$5,000,000 to the Department of the Interior on July 17 for soil erosion prevention work on public and private lands. McCrory and Lewis A. Jones, head of BAE's Division of Drainage and Erosion Control, believed that their Bureau would be given leadership of the erosion control project. The project would be operated as outlined in their plan of June 9, which had been sent forward a week before the NIRA was signed.²⁵ Acting on the same supposition, USDA's Daily Digest of news stories on July 25 reported on the allotment of \$5,000,000 for soil erosion prevention. It quoted the Special Board for Public Works as saying the plan "provides for the practice of terracing, which agricultural engineers have found to be the most effective means of controlling erosion." Funds were to be allotted to the States in proportion to their cultivated acres.²⁶

As it turned out, the announcement was premature. In early June as the Colliers were meeting with USDA officials, but before the passage of NIRA and before the committee had studied the Navajo reservation, Samuel H. McCrory, Chief of the BAE, drafted a plan that called on the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works to fund a national terrace-building program. In the letter that Acting Secretary Rexford Tugwell sent to Harold Ickes, USDA recommended that the BAE be designated "to handle the administrative and engineering features of this work." Secretary Wallace penned a note to the outgoing letter. "I have had this matter of expenditure of Public Works money for erosion control up with the President and he is very much interested."²⁷

BUREAU OF AGRICULTURAL ENGINEERING PROPOSAL AND BENNETT'S ANGER

The announcement of the BAE's proposal evidently touched off the episode recounted in Wellington Brink's *Big Hugh* and in Rexford Tugwell's *Roosevelt's Revolution: The First Year - A Personal Perspective*. Tugwell was writing more than forty years after the incident and Bennett's recollections were obviously the source for Brink's account. While somewhat different in details, the two accounts comport in the essential elements.



Rexford G. Tugwell

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Prints and Photographs Division,
Library of Congress

In an agitated state, Bennett ignored protocol and went straight to the Assistant Secretary's office, where Tugwell invited him in. Tugwell had the various plans laid out on his desk. He tried to assure a skeptical Bennett that he, Tugwell, had planned to consult Bennett before making a decision. The two knew each other, at least through correspondence, before Tugwell—a

professor of economics at Columbia University—became Assistant Secretary on March 7, 1933. Tugwell also served in FDR's "Brain Trust," the personal advisors selected more for their expertise and commitment than for their political connections and acumen. Bennett had supplied material on soil erosion for Tugwell's *American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement*.²⁸ Both Bennett and Tugwell, from their different perspectives had come to view soil as a kind of public trust.

Reacting to the national terracing proposal, Bennett repeated his familiar arguments for interdependent, mutually supporting practices for soil conservation. Terraces certainly contributed to soil conservation when designed properly and when built on the appropriate soils. However, terraces were no panacea, and should be supported by strip cropping, contour plowing, crop rotations and grassed waterways. The soil conservation experiment station under Bennett's supervision had been researching soil-conserving efficiency of all these practices. Furthermore, Bennett feared that this propitious moment for a national soil conservation program might be squandered if a narrow approach were taken. As recounted through Brink, Tugwell agreed saying "That sounds reasonable to me," Tugwell agreed. "I'll see what I can do to direct the use of the money approved by the public works board under Secretary Ickes." Further Tugwell assured Bennett that he would have a leading part in the program.²⁹

PLANS OF THE OFFICE OF INDIAN AFFAIRS

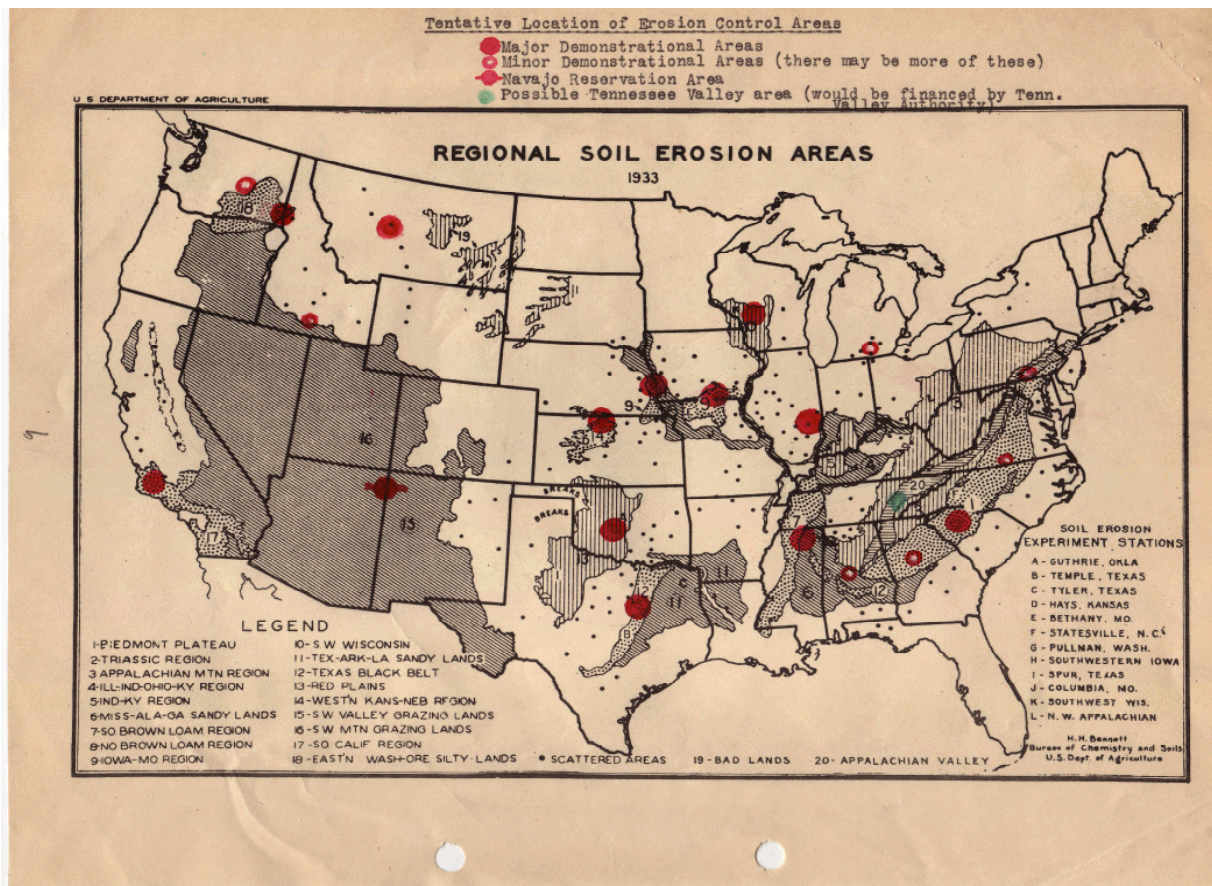
Another problem with the national terracing plan was that it did not seem to accommodate the work John Collier wanted done on the reservations. Collier requested \$2,500,000 for work on the reservations which would be handled by The Office of Indian Affairs, "rather than through the Department of Agriculture."³⁰ Collier remained enthusiastic about Bennett. In response to an inquiry he wrote to Congressman Will Hastings, "I have seen a

good deal of Dr. Bennett in recent months and have developed the highest regard for him."³¹ Collier understood that improved range management, in addition to water development and control of erosion, would be needed on the reservation. He saw the wisdom in Bennett's interdisciplinary approach, and heartily recommended him to Ickes to head up the soil erosion work. John Collier assessed Bennett thusly, "He sees the matter steadily and whole, and is not an engineering fanatic nor a re-seeding an ecological fanatic nor an animal husbandry fanatic."³²

TUGWELL'S INFLUENCE

Rexford Tugwell's actions confirm the assurances given to Bennett in their meeting. Tugwell held a conference on July 24 and directed changes in the Bureau of Agriculture Engineering plan which had been submitted to Ickes on June 9. The revised plan bears Bennett's handiwork. The work would be limited to approximately ten large areas where, "Terracing, strip-cropping and seeding to permanent pastures are to be the principal control measures employed on the crop land, with possibly some tree planting on the steepest and most severely washed slopes." Each project would include specialists in agronomy, engineering, range or forestry and other disciplines. The outline generally fit with the future organization of the demonstration projects that Bennett would initiate as director of the Soil Erosion Service. Also, the idea of large work areas accommodated Collier's plans for the Navajo Reservation. The Navajo Project was destined to be the second demonstration project initiated and the largest in real extent of all the projects.³³

Tugwell had influence with the President and with Secretary Ickes. Ickes would soon be making his ill-fated case to Roosevelt to evolve the Interior department into a Department of Conservation that would necessitate transferring the Forest Service. Ickes regarded Tugwell's ability highly and hoped to entice him to assume the chief administrative position in the new Department of Conservation. Given the



conflicts in USDA over supervision of the soil conservation work, Tugwell recommended placing the soil conservation operation, based on Bennett's plan, in the new Public Works Administration. Tugwell thought Ickes had agreed to this arrangement. While on a trip in the West, he was surprised to learn that Ickes had placed the new Soil Erosion Service in the Department of the Interior on August 25.

Tugwell was more successful in recommending the first director. He favored Harlan Barrows, professor of geography at the University of Chicago. Barrows taught courses in conservation and natural resources and, reputedly, the first course in historical geography in the United States. True to his word, Tugwell passed along the suggestion to Barrows that Bennett should have a prominent role in the organization. At Ickes request, Barrows travelled to Washington where Ickes offered him the job on August 30, 1933.³⁴ After conferring with the Dean of the Physical Science Division and the President of University of Chicago, Barrows declined the job.³⁵ Ickes,

dismayed at the delay, wrote to Wallace; "I am anxious to have this matter undertaken at once, as I know you are, and I regret the delay due to our waiting for Dr. Barrows, since, in the end, his decision was in the negative. How about H. H. Bennett of the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils, of your department?"³⁶

SELECTION OF HUGH HAMMOND BENNETT AS DIRECTOR, SOIL EROSION SERVICE

Secretary Wallace called Bennett in to discuss his transfer to the Soil Erosion Service and they reached an agreement that it was best he take leave without pay from USDA while working on the soil conservation project. Bennett asked that a number of the specialists at the experiment stations under this direction be detailed to the work, and Wallace agreed. Although the job had initially been offered to Barrows at Tugwell's suggestion, Wallace assured Ickes that "I have the feeling that Mr. Bennett is the best qualified man available to take over these duties. He has devoted more

study to the problem of erosion than any other man in the country..."³⁷

Bennett prepared a plan for the new service, and discussed it with Ickes on Saturday, September 16.³⁸ The following Monday Bennett wrote Ickes trying to persuade him that the best name for the agency would be the Soil Conservation Service. Bennett favored the more optimistic, positive term. The term in fact more accurately described the interrelated methods used to conserve and improve soils, not just hold them in place. Ickes would not relent and Bennett became Director, Soil Erosion Service (SES). The Soil Erosion Service was moved to USDA at President Roosevelt's direction in March

1935 and an act of Congress on April 27, 1935, created the Soil Conservation Service.³⁹

Wallace's assessment that Bennett was the best-qualified person to lead a concerted Federal action for soil conservation was correct. Preparation and opportunity intersected in his selection as Director of the Soil Erosion Service. The events of June through September of 1933 were particularly decisive, demonstrating the role of contingency in historical developments. In this case those events were critical to the history of the Soil Conservation Service and Hugh Bennett's recognition as the father of soil conservation.

¹ SCS was renamed the Natural Resources Conservation Service as a result of the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-354).

² Hugh H. Bennett, *The Hugh Bennett Lectures* (Raleigh: North Carolina State College, The Agricultural Foundation, 1959), pp. 12-13.

³ Hugh. H. Bennett and William. R. Chapline, *Soil Erosion A National Menace*. U.S. Department of Agriculture Circular No. 33 (Washington, D. C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1928, pp. 20-23.

⁴The first part of the essay is based on Douglas Helms, "Hugh Hammond Bennett," In Press, *Modern American Environmentalists* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press).

⁵ *Cong. Rec.*, 73rd Cong., 1st sess., 77:1, 650, 659-660.

⁶ Ickes Diary, May 16, 1933, Papers of Harold L. Ickes, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Hereinafter cited as Ickes Diary.

⁷ Henry A. Wallace to S. H. McCrory, May 30, 1933, File 3-20-C Soil Conservation, General Correspondence, 1931-39, Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering, Record Group 8, National Archives and Records Administration-College Park, Maryland. Hereinafter the following abbreviations will be used: RG for Record Group and NARA for National Archives and Records Administration.

⁸ Executive Order No. 6198, July 8, 1933.

⁹ 48 Stat 195, 201.

¹⁰ Rexford G. Tugwell, Acting Secretary, to Administrator, Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, June 9, 1933, File 19414 - 1933 - Control of Erosion - 344, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian Division, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, RG 75, NARA—Washington, D. C.

¹¹ Donald L. Parman, *Indians and the American West* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) pp. 92-93.

¹² Parman, *Indians and the American West*, pp. 76-77.

¹³ E. R. Fryer, "The Navajo Service." pp.1-8. *Proceedings of the First Navajo Land Management Conference*, March 2-6, 1937, Falstaff, Arizona, pp. 1-8, Soil Conservation Service Region Eight Records, Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico.

¹⁴ Solon T. Kimball and John H. Province, "Navajo Social Organization in Land Use Planning." *Applied Anthropology* 4(Number 1, 1942): 19-20.

¹⁵ John Collier, *From Every Zenith: A Memoir and Some Essays on Life and Thought* (Denver: Sage Books, 1963), pp. 237-238.

¹⁶ "Report on interviews with H. H. Bennett, W. R. Chapline, and Frank Craighead. (Stamped received in Bureau of Indian Affairs, May 31, 1933. Jay B. Nash, Director, Indian Emergency Conservation Work. John Collier wrote to A. G. McCall on May 24, requesting Musgrave's and Lewis's

assistance. The meeting took place on or before that date). File 19414 - 1933 - Control of Erosion - 344, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian Division, RG 75, NARA-Washington, D.C.

¹⁷ Knight to Wallace June 9, 1933, File 37017, General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Soils, RG 54, NARA-College Park.

¹⁸ Wallace to Knight, June 14, 1933, File 37017, General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Soils, RG 54, NARA-College Park

¹⁹ John Collier to Wallace, June 10, 1933, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps - Indian Division, 194141 - 1933 - Control of Erosion - 344, RG 75, NARA—Washington, D. C..

²⁰ Navajo Dairy, Hugh Hammond Bennett Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

²¹ Donald L. Parman, *The Navajos and the New Deal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 42.

²² Navajo Tribal Council Resolutions, p. 151.

²³ Musgrave to J. B. Nash, June 29, 1933, File 19414 - 1933 - Control of Erosion - 344, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian Division, RG 75, NARA-Washington, D. C.

²⁴ A. G. Rice to A. G. McCall, October 10, 1933, File 19414 - 1933 - Control of Erosion - 344, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian Division, RG 75, NARA-Washington, D. C.

²⁵ Lewis A. Jones to S. H. McCrory, July 19, 1933, and Jones to C. E. Ramser, July 20, 1933, File 3-20-C Soil Conservation, General Correspondence, 1931-39, Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering, Record Group 8, NARA-College Park.

²⁶ *Daily Digest*, Vol. 50, No. 20, July 25, 1933. Copy in Civilian Conservation Corps - Indian Division, 194141 - 1933 - Control of Erosion - 344, RG 75, NARA-Washington, D. C.

²⁷ Rexford G. Tugwell, Acting Secretary, to Administrator, Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, June 9, 1933, File 19414 - 1933 - Control of Erosion - 344, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian Division, RG 75, NARA—Washington, D. C.

²⁸ Some colleges had adopted the book as a text but dropped it when Tugwell became the lightning rod for critics of the administration's land and agriculture policies.

²⁹ Wellington Brink, *Big Hugh: The Father of Soil Conservation* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 82-84; Rexford G. Tugwell, *Roosevelt's Revolution: The First Year, A Personal Perspective* (New York : Macmillan, 1977), pp. 246-249.

³⁰ Ickes, Federal Emergency Administrator of Public Works to Colonel Waite, August 9, 1933, File 1-275 Soil Erosion, Central Classified Files, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, RG 48, NARA-College Park.

³¹ John Collier to William Hastings, July 28 1933, Chronological File, John Collier Papers, Microform of the original papers in Yale University Library. Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1980.

³² Douglas Helms, "Hugh Hammond Bennett," in press, *Modern American Environmentalists*. (Johns Hopkins University Press).

³³ Memorandum in Regard to Erosion Control Project of the United States Department OF Agricultural Under Authority of the National Industrial Recovery Act, July 31, 1933, File 1-275 Soil Erosion, Central Classified Files, RG 48, NARA-College Park.

³⁴ Ickes Diary, August 30, 1933, Page 253.

³⁵ Harland Barrows to Rexford Tugwell, September 1, 1933, "Positions-Outside," General Correspondence, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, RG 16, NARA-College Park.

³⁶ Ickes to Wallace, September 3, 1933, "Positions-Outside," General Correspondence," RG 16, NARA-College Park

³⁷ Wallace to Ickes, September 12, 1933, "Positions Outside," General Correspondence, RG 16, NARA-College Park.

³⁸ Ickes Diary, September 16, 1933.

³⁹ Bennett to Ickes, September 18, 1933, File 1-275 Soil Erosion, Central Classified Files, RG 48, NARA-College Park