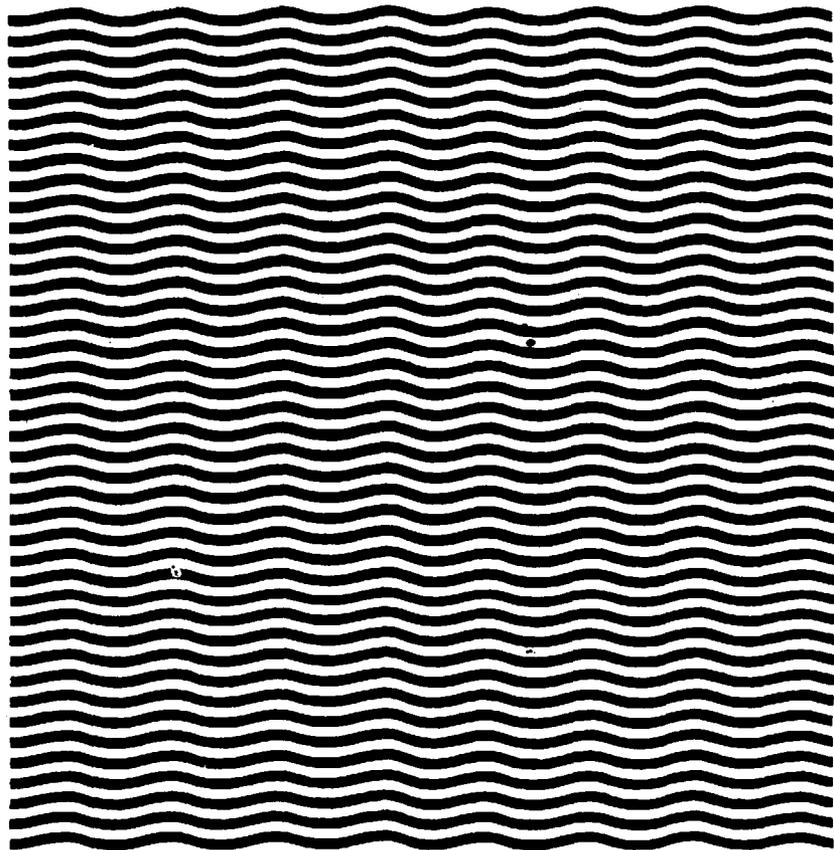
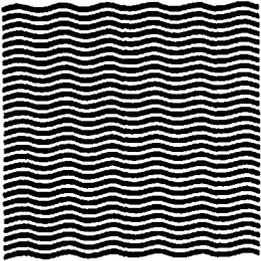




United States
Department of
Agriculture

Soil
Conservation
Service

A History of Water Resource Activities of the United States Department of Agriculture



A HISTORY OF
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
WATER RESOURCE ACTIVITIES

by
Eugene C. Buie

Preface

This brief history was written to explain how and why the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) became a participant in national water resources development programs.

USDA was engaged in water resources management studies before the close of the 19th century. With the establishment of the Soil Conservation Service in 1935 and enactment of the Flood Control Act of 1936, USDA water resources programs were enlarged significantly. The Flood Control Act of 1944 and the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 added new responsibilities and programs for water resources planning and construction of works of improvement. In recent years, USDA has been assigned numerous new water resources planning and management authorities, including an important role for implementing President Carter's water policy initiatives.

This historical record provides information for analyzing water resources programs and for shaping appropriate USDA roles in future water management efforts. Fulfilling its broad responsibilities for protection and improving natural resources and for maintaining environmental quality requires USDA's creative, positive, and direct involvement in Federal water resources policies and actions.



Joseph W. Haas
Assistant Administrator
for Water Resources

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The views expressed in this report are not necessarily the official policy of USDA.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On May 15, 1862, President Lincoln signed into law an Act of Congress establishing "at the seat of the Government of the United States a Department of Agriculture, the general design and duties of which shall be to acquire and diffuse among the people of the United States useful information on subjects connected with agriculture in the most general and comprehensive sense of that word, and to procure, propagate, and distribute among the people new and valuable seeds and plants." (1) This Act was the culmination of efforts and recommendations made over a period

Later, other agents were appointed in the South and elsewhere. In 1914 this system was extended throughout the nation with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act. (8)

In 1889, the Weather Bureau was transferred from the War Department to the Department of Agriculture. An Appropriation Act of March, 1889, (30 Stat. L., 947, 952) made a specific appropriation of \$10,000 "to enable the Secretary of Agriculture to map the tobacco soils of the United States." This was the beginning of the Soil Survey. The Weather Bureau initiated USDA's work on soils in 1892 by publishing a report on the "Relation of Soil to Climate" and a bulletin on "Some Physical Properties of Soils in Their Relation to Moisture and Crop Distribution". This bulletin

under limited moisture supplies and semi-arid conditions. This same year the states in the Great Plains began to establish permanent substations to study dryland problems. Twenty-two substations were established between

Stat. 699) was passed. As amended and supplemented (16 U.S.C. 581) it "authorizes and directs the Secretary of Agriculture to conduct such investigations, experiments, and tests as he may deem necessary....in order to determine, demonstrate and promulgate the best method....of maintaining favorable conditions of water flow and the prevention of erosion". (20)

In 1925 Congress directed the Corps of Engineers and the Federal Power Commission to prepare jointly a list of navigable streams and their tributaries on which power development appeared practicable (with the exception of the Colorado River). This list was to be prepared with a view to formulating "general plans for the most effective improvement of such streams for the purposes of navigation and the prosecution of such navigation improvement in combination with development for power, flood control, and irrigation". The list of streams which resulted from this effort was submitted to Congress in 1927 and printed in House Document 308. The 1927 Rivers and Harbors Act authorized the Corps to prosecute these surveys alone. Reports prepared on these streams became known as the "308 reports". These reports were to have a significant influence in studies to be made later by the Department of Agriculture.

USDA's early research work was not limited to irrigation, drainage and soil-moisture relationships. It has been engaged in research on the hydrology of agricultural watersheds since 1917. In that year a suitable area of 112 acres situated about $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles southeast of Jackson, Madison County, Tennessee, was chosen as the site for experimentation. Nearly all the area was in a farm owned by M. N. Murchison. The experiments conducted consisted in making rainfall and run-off measurements on six watersheds ranging in area from $1\frac{1}{4}$ to 112 acres. (22)

This research provided the basic concepts and data for use of the rational method of computing the maximum rate of run-off from a watershed. The basic assumption was that the maximum rate of run-off would result from a rainfall of maximum uniform intensity continuing for a time equal to or exceeding the time of concentration of a given watershed. The relationship was expressed by the following equation:

$$Q = C I A$$

Where Q = Run-off coefficient or coefficient of imperviousness, representing the rate of run-off to the rate of rainfall.

I = Rainfall intensity in cubic feet per second per acre, or approximately in inches per hour.

A = The watershed area in acres.

This method of run-off computation supplanted the use of empirical formulae that previously had been used for computing storm run-off but did not make provision for the various factors affecting run-off. (23) It is estimated that, eventually, 150 instrumented watersheds, ranging in size from 1 to 500 acres, were utilized to collect run-off data from small agricultural areas.

On November 21, 1928, during a hearing before the Agricultural Appropriations Committee of the House of Representatives, Congressman James P. Buchanan of Texas remarked that one experiment station at Spur, Texas, had been doing valuable work on soil erosion.* He pleaded that the nation needed a general policy of soil and water conservation. After receiving data on funds needed to make a start on the problem, Congress responded by appropriating funds for soil erosion investigations and the

CHAPTER 2

PRE-WORLD WAR II ACTIVITIES

Soil Conservation Service

On August 25, 1933, the Soil Erosion Service was established as a temporary organization in the U. S. Department of the Interior. This action was taken without formal order, but was based on a resolution adopted on July 17, 1933, by a special board of public works. The new agency was to carry out the provisions of the National Industrial Recovery Act of June 16, 1933 (48 Stat. 195) relating to soil erosion prevention and to administer the expenditure of Public Works Administration Allocations for this purpose. On September 19, 1933, the Soil Erosion Service became operational with the transfer of Hugh H. Bennett from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of the Interior as its Director. (26)

All funds, personnel, property and equipment of the Soil Erosion Service were transferred to the Department of Agriculture by an Administrative Order signed by the Federal Emergency Administrator of Public Works on March 23, 1935. The order was approved by the President on March 25, 1935. Authority for this action was cited as Executive Order 6252, August 19, 1933, and Executive Order 6929, December 26, 1934. As a result of this transfer to the Department of Agriculture, the Emergency Conservation Work (ECW) camps assigned to the Forest Service for erosion control work on agricultural lands were transferred to the SES. (These camps were manned by CCC personnel.) Additional new camps also were assigned to the Service. (27)

On March 27, 1935, the Secretary of Agriculture, by Departmental Memorandum 665, directed the unification of the Department's activities pertaining to soil erosion under the Soil Erosion Service. This order transferred to the SES the erosion control experiment stations of the Bureau of Chemistry and Soils and the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering and the erosion control nurseries of the Bureau of Plant Industry. (28)

The 10 experiment stations transferred were located near Guthrie, Oklahoma; Temple, Texas; Hays, Kansas; Tyler, Texas; Bethany, Missouri; Statesville, North Carolina; Pullman, Washington; Clarinda, Iowa; La Crosse, Wisconsin; and Zanesville, Ohio. (29)

On April 27, 1935, the President approved the Soil Conservation Act of 1935 (P.L. 46-74th Cong.). It directed the Secretary of Agriculture to establish an agency to be known as the "Soil Conservation Service" to exercise the powers conferred on him by the Act. On that same day the Secretary issued Departmental Memorandum 673 establishing the Soil Conservation Service in the Department of Agriculture. It further provided that the SCS include the activities conducted under the Soil Erosion Service. (30)

By December 31, 1935, the SCS, along with its other program activities, such as demonstration projects, was operating 489 Emergency

Conservation Work Camps (Civilian Conservation Corps). These camps provided the technical assistance, manual labor, and necessary materials to install water related and other erosion control measures on privately owned lands. The measures included terraces, waterways, check dams, gully control structures, stock ponds, wind breaks, tree plantings, grass plantings, wildlife plantings, and assistance with irrigation and drainage. WPA labor crews also were utilized for this purpose in some localities. The ECW Camps continued to be utilized in this manner until the outbreak of WWII called for their disbandment.

Public Law 74-46, 49 Stat. 163, was stated in very general language and permitted a wide range of activities. In its preamble it states:

"...that it is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress to provide permanently for the control and prevention of soil erosion and thereby to preserve natural resources, control floods, prevent impairment of reservoirs, and maintain the navigability of rivers and harbors, protect public health, public lands and relieve unemployment, and the Secretary of Agriculture, from now on, shall coordinate and direct all activities with relation to soil erosion...."

This broad authority has permitted the Secretary to participate in essentially all programs related to soil and water resources, being limited only by personnel and appropriation of funds.

The SCS was staffed to include all the disciplines considered necessary to provide technical assistance to meet all the needs of a farmer or rancher in planning and applying a complete conservation program on his lands. The disciplines included: soil conservationist (an individual whose formal training and/or experience qualified him to coordinate the several disciplines required to plan and apply a complete conservation plan), soil scientist, agronomist, engineer, biologist, geologist, forester, range specialist, and plant material specialist. These disciplines were dispersed at various levels of Service organization depending upon the degree of demand for their services. The organization was such that service for each discipline could be provided at any level of Service organization.

On June 6, 1935, the Secretary of Agriculture's Committee on Soil Conservation made a recommendation, approved by the Secretary, to the effect: "That on or after July 1, 1937....all erosion-control work on private lands, including new demonstration projects, be undertaken by the Soil Conservation Service only through legally constituted Soil Conservation Associations". Out of this action, Soil Conservation Districts were born. In February 1937, the President submitted to the Governors of all States a standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law. He suggested that authority be given farmers and ranchers to organize districts specifically for conservation of soil and water resources. (31) On March 3, 1937, the first Soil Conservation Districts Law was enacted in Arkansas. (32)

Rapid action followed in other states. As early as April 24, 1941, one state, Alabama, had all its farmland included in soil conservation districts. (33) By the late 1960's there were about 3000 districts in the 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. All of these were cooperating with the SCS. (34)

Through these districts and the responsibility of SCS for the technical aspects of the ACP administered by the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, the SCS had technical relationships within almost every county of the nation. This provided the SCS with a technical delivery system to essentially every county of the U. S. This is a unique capability within the Federal Government.

National Resource Planning Organizations

There were four successive national planning organizations which operated between 1933 and 1943. They were really the same agency reorganized three times. When Congress abolished the last of the four, the National Water Resources Planning Board, in 1943, it instructed that the agency's functions not be transferred to any other agency. (35)

The National Planning Board was the first of the four. It was

of Maryland's Department of Health, and a USDA alternate from Bureau of Agricultural Engineering. (39)

This committee was to serve as a coordinating and steering group for continuation and re-orientation of water studies under the Natural Resources Committee. Its objectives were (1) to achieve closer contact and cooperation with other Federal agencies, and (2) to achieve a necessary reduction in overhead costs of the Section. To do this it would work through other agencies and not build up a continuing committee staff. Among the subjects with which it was concerned were: Policy in regard to small water developments, and Policy on flood control projects. (40)

On October 8, 1935, the committee submitted a Report on Federal Activities Relating to Small Water Storage Projects. The following quote summarizes its findings:

"Small water storage construction programs have found wide popularity as Federal work relief during the past two years. Federal agencies had long been interested in this type of project from the standpoint of design and use for stock water supply, irrigation, flood protection, recreation, wildlife conservation, power, and erosion control, but it was not until the emergency relief program of 1933 was authorized that large scale construction became practicable. Under the Civilian Conservation Corps thousands of projects supervised by the Forest Service, Division of Grazing, Indian Office, National Park Service, and Soil Conservation Service were built on public domain and on private lands as well, and under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration many states initiated extensive small dam programs." (41)

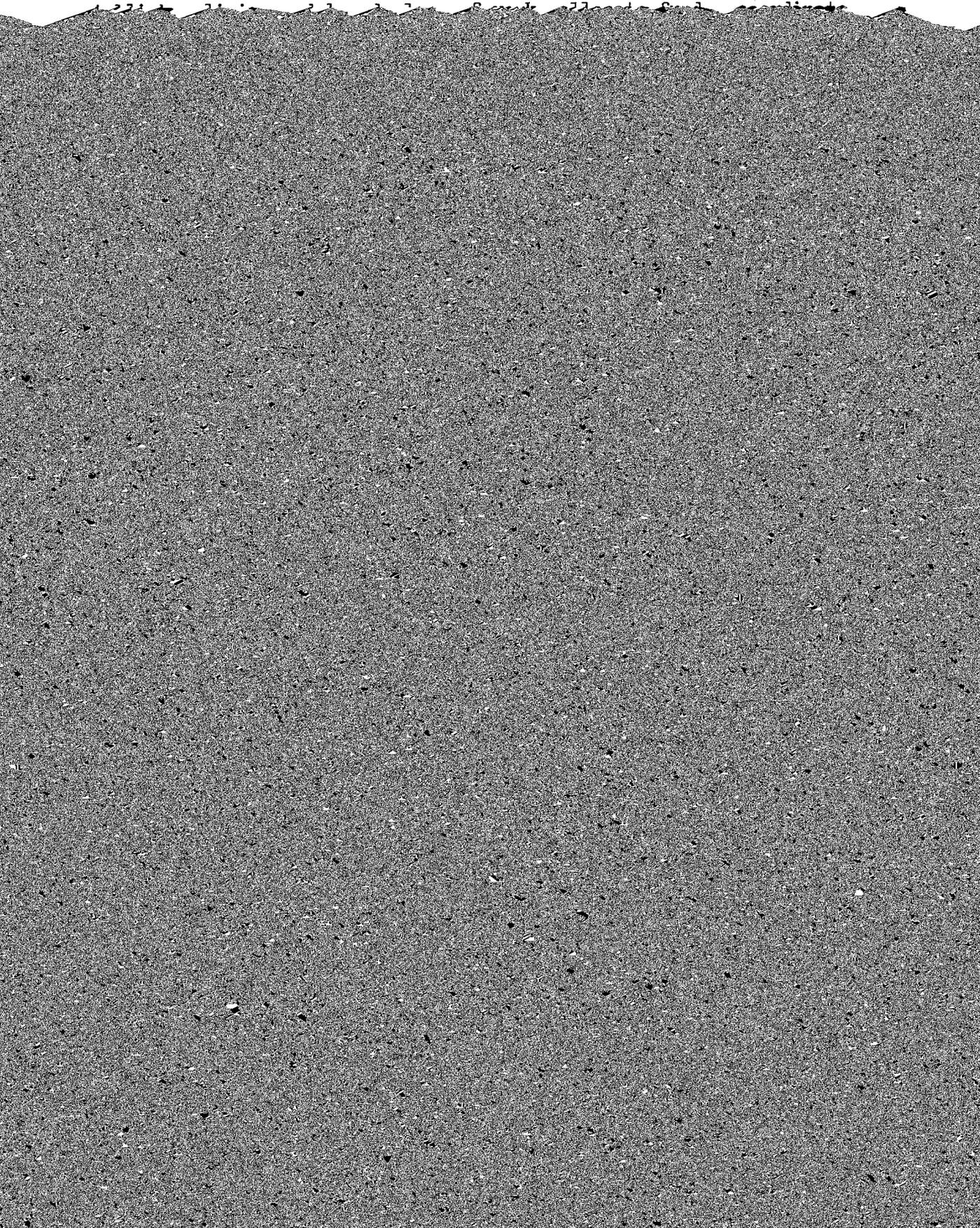
The Report also gave a statement regarding the extent of this program. It amounted to 1,100 recreational dams, 3,600 farm ponds, 2,000 water holes, 1,150,000 erosion control dams, and 2,600 other small reservoirs. These were constructed by CCC camps during the period April 1933 to March 1935. (42)

Probably the most important achievement of the Water Resources Committee was a nationwide study of drainage basin problems and programs. It contained recommendations for both Federal and State development. It also sponsored more detailed studies on particular river basins. (43)

In 1939 the National Resources Committee was reconstituted as the National Resources Planning Board and elevated to the role of planning

and the Soil Conservation Service. (45)

The Secretary of Agriculture established a Director of Flood Control in his office with a small staff. Its duties were defined as:



established in the Department. The SCS representative was designated as

During this same six-year period, 41 detailed surveys were initiated. Reports on 17 of these were approved by the Secretary of

2d Sess.); (19) Trinity (Tex.)(H.D. 708, 77th Cong., 2d Sess.); (20) Washita (Okla., Tex.)(H.D. 275, 78th Cong., 2d Sess.); (21) Yazoo (Miss.) (H.D. 564, 78th Cong., 2d Sess.); (22) Sevier Lake (Utah)(H.D. 406, 82d Cong., 2d Sess.); (23) Delaware River (N.Y., Pa., N.J., Del.)(H.D. 405, 82d Cong., 2d Sess.); (24) Pecos (Tex., N.M.)(H.D. 475, 82d Cong., 2d Sess.); (25) Scioto River (Ohio)(H.D. 409, 82d Cong., 2d Sess.). (62)

Eleven of these were authorized for implementation by the 1944 Flood Control Act. Of those not authorized, the plan for the Missouri River Basin merits some additional discussion.

Missouri River Basin Plan

The Army Corps of Engineers' "308" reports and studies by the Bureau of Reclamation during the 1920's and the 1930's began to define the over all water problems of the Missouri River Basin. The Corps prepared a plan for the basin emphasizing flood control and navigation. This plan was called the "Pick" plan after Division Engineer, Colonel Lewis A. Pick. The Bureau of Reclamation developed a plan for the Basin which stressed irrigation and hydroelectric power. It was called the "Sloan" plan after William G. Sloan who headed the study. The two plans were reconciled with relatively minor adjustments and called the "Pick-Sloan Plan". This plan was authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1944. (63)

Five dams were authorized and completed on the Missouri River downstream from the Fort Peck dam, which was completed in 1940. Their combined reservoir storage capacity was over 75 million acre-feet, including the Fort Peck reservoir. In addition to the main-stem dams, there were 103 dams and reservoirs authorized on the headwaters and various tributaries which would provide an additional 110 million acre-feet of storage. (64)

The Corps would be responsible for all the main-stem dams and those others with flood control and navigation as primary functions. The Bureau would be responsible for those upstream reservoirs whose primary functions would be irrigation and hydroelectric power generation. (65)

The Pick-Sloan Plan was not held in high esteem by all the

it had run off the land into the big rivers; but what was really needed was first a program of land and water resource development that began to control and make use of the water on the land on which it fell and in the small streams - thus using the water all the way from the time it fell on the fields, forests and farms until it reached the big rivers". (67) Apparently others had the same feelings regarding the Pick-Sloan Plan, because USDA Secretary Brannan directed that a plan containing these principles be prepared. (68)

Gladwin E. Young was placed in charge of a work group to do this job. Each agency of the USDA was to cooperate and to provide the necessary staff. State Agricultural Colleges were asked to work with the group. In about a year an Agricultural Plan for the Missouri River Basin was completed. It was submitted to the Congress September 29, 1949, and published as House Document 373, 81st Cong., 1st Sess. The USDA plan attracted the interest of the press and the general public and came to be known as the "Young Plan". (69)

Along with the other USDA flood control survey reports, the USDA Missouri Basin Plan set "forth a broad program specifically designed to conserve and improve the soil for sustained productive use, protect and enhance the forest resource, abate flood and sediment damages, provide for more efficient land use through irrigation and drainage, protect the water resource,...." (70) These reports also were unique in that they placed the responsibility for implementation, operation and maintenance on the people who control and use privately owned land.

The "Young Plan" was one of the first reports to propose upstream flood water retarding structures to reduce flood flows. It contained proposals for from 14,000 to 16,000 such structures for a region containing about one-sixth of the area of the United States. (71)

These flood control surveys set the stage for the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention program which was soon to follow.

Water Facilities Act of 1937

The Water Facilities Act of 1937 (P.L. 399, 75th Cong.), also known as the Pope-Jones Act, authorized the Secretary of Agriculture to plan and construct agricultural water storage and utilization projects in the arid and semiarid areas of the United States. The projects could be located either on federally or privately owned land. (72)

In July 1938, the Secretary of Agriculture directed the Soil Conservation Service to participate with the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and the Farm Security Administration in carrying out this program. It consisted of helping farmers and ranchers in the low-rainfall areas of the 17 Western States in building up water supplies through new installations, repair or enlargement of existing facilities, and developing conservation-management plans for those farms and ranches where work was to be done. (73)

Applications for assistance were made on an area basis. The Bureau of Agricultural Economics prepared the area plan, including justification for the project. The Soil Conservation Service provided the engineering and other technical assistance needed for implementation of the plan. The Farm Security Administration provided financial assistance through loans. Overall program guidance was provided from the Secretary's office by a Water Facilities Coordinator. (74)

On January 1, 1937, the Resettlement Administration, established on April 30, 1935, as an independent agency, was transferred to the

directed the Secretary of the Interior "to undertake the construction, including acquisition of water rights, rights-of-way, and other interests in land, of water conservation and utilization projects in the Great Plains and arid and semiarid areas of the United States". Any money ex-

USDA FLOOD PREVENTION
ANNUAL OBLIGATIONS
(11 AUTHORIZED WATERSHEDS)

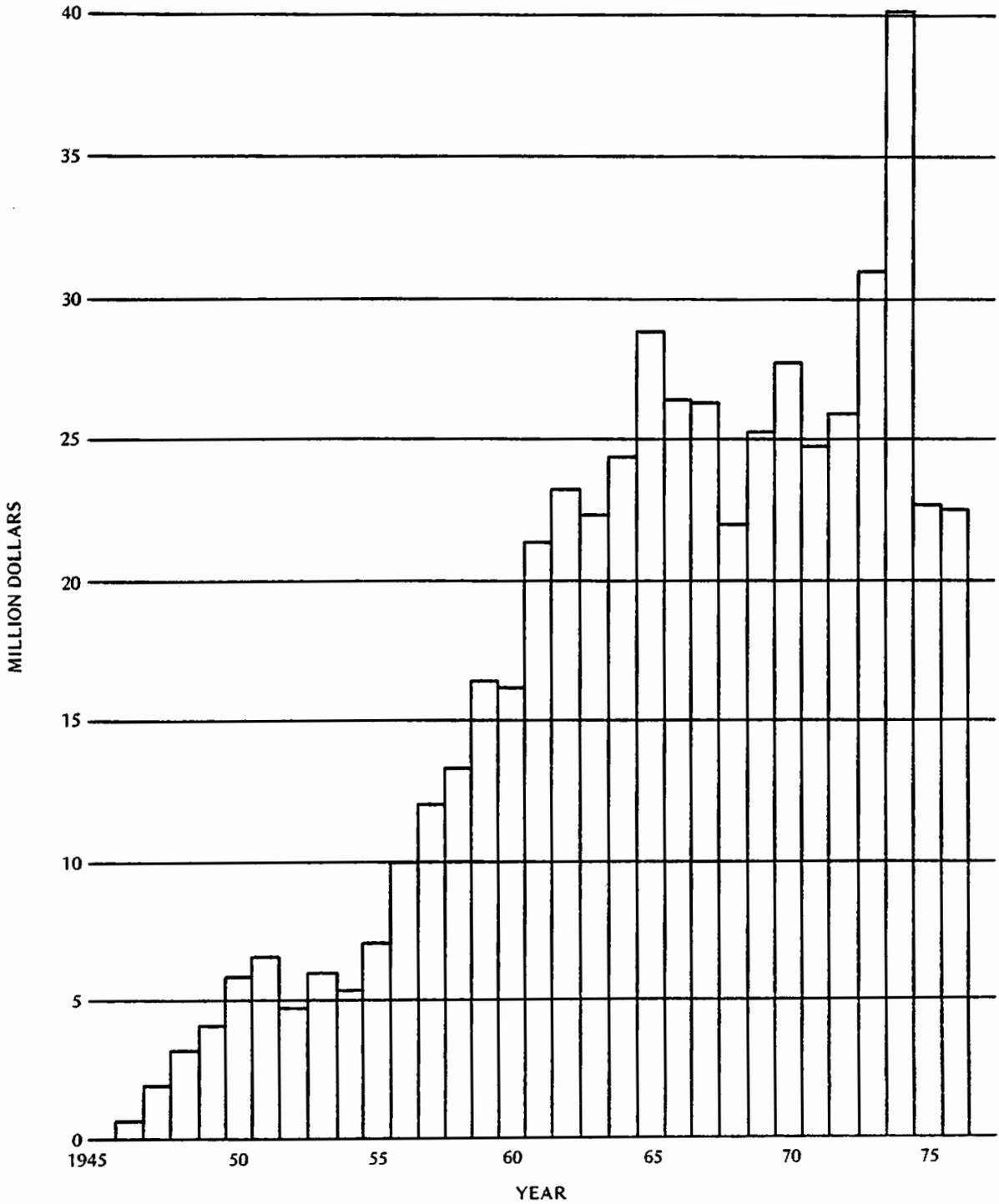


FIGURE 1

plain. The first construction contract was awarded in June 1950. It covered two structures. Construction of the 24 dams was completed in November 1952. Sandstone Creek was one of the first watersheds in the nation ready for the installation of a complete flood prevention program, including both land treatment and interrelated upstream measures. (89)

The 11 authorized watershed projects became the predecessors of the small watershed projects authorized by the Agricultural Appropriations Act of 1953 and the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (P.L. 83-566). As the initial scope of the P.L. 83-566 projects was expanded, the same authorities were extended to the authorized watershed projects. Therefore, the same basic authorities and purposes are now included in the 11 authorized projects as in the P.L. 83-566 projects. (90)

The Soil Conservation Service and the Forest Service have joint responsibilities in discharging the Secretary of Agriculture's responsibility in this program. The SCS has program leadership and is responsible for work on privately owned land. The Forest Service is responsible for all watershed work in National Forests and provides technical assistance for work on other forest land in each watershed. (91)

The local people develop subwatershed work plans with the assistance of the SCS and Forest Service. Other agencies also assist when the need arises and they are requested to do so; i.e.: Federal financial assistance for land treatment is generally available through the Agricultural Conservation Program; loans may be available to eligible sponsors through the Farmers Home Administration after a plan has been approved; and the Economic Research Service appraises the impact of a project on the local economy. (92)

Cost sharing is such that local people put about the same amount of money into these projects as the Federal government. As of June 1975 the Federal government had spent \$464,452,000 and, as of June 1974, it is estimated the local people had spent \$379,636,000. Only one project has been reported as complete: Buffalo Creek, N.Y. in 1964. (93)

Annual obligations for the program are shown in figure 1 (SCS

- Accomplishments in the construction of multiple-purpose and flood-water retarding structures through fiscal year 1977 are: Washita River Project - 1,001; Trinity River Project - 847; Middle Colorado River Project - 268. (96)

Currently emphasis is being placed on the completion of planned land treatment measures, including tree planting and other forestry measures in order to ensure a balanced watershed development.

USDA OBLIGATIONS PILOT WATERSHEDS (ANNUAL AND CUMULATIVE)

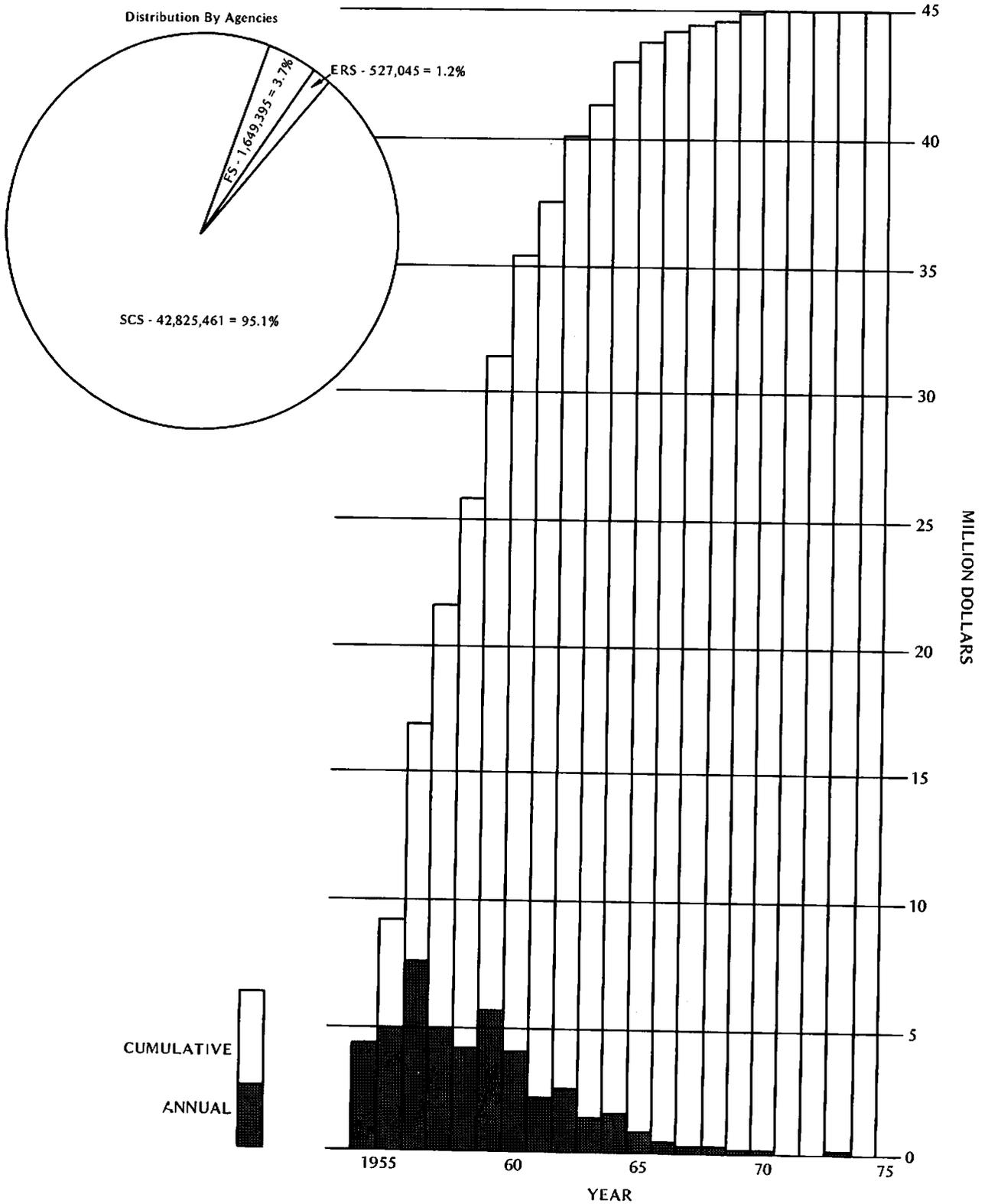


FIGURE 2

of the planned and installed works of improvement. Appropriate agreements were reached with U. S. Geological Survey to make the hydrologic evaluations and with the Economic Research Service to make the economic evaluations.

Distribution of the watersheds among the states was as follows:

Other Activities

In December 1938, the Secretary of Agriculture had transferred to the SCS that part of the work of the Division of Irrigation and Drainage

in proposed projects. This was the first time SCS had been given legislative authority to provide assistance in irrigation and drainage. Prior to this time it had used transfer responsibilities and permitting language in appropriations acts.

The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act was a landmark action for SCS. It added a new scope to its program responsibilities and provided it with a new set of incentives to get a complete conservation program with interrelated structural measures installed on the ground. Its importance is such that the entire next chapter of this document is devoted to this program.

CHAPTER 4

WATERSHED PROTECTION AND FLOOD PREVENTION PROGRAM

Legislation

The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (P.L. 83-566) was approved by the President on August 4, 1954. Robert J. Morgan, in his article "The Small Watershed Program", stated that this was a Soil

could be carried out in cooperation with other Federal, state and local agencies. This was a significant feature because it permitted USDA to continue to work with the other Federal agencies.