

# Biography of Hugh Hammond Bennett

*April 15, 1881 – July 7, 1960, The Father of Soil Conservation*

Hugh Hammond Bennett led the soil conservation movement in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, urged the nation to address the "national menace" of soil erosion, and created a new federal agency and served as its first chief – the Soil Conservation Service, now the Natural Resources Conservation Service in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He is considered today to be the father of soil conservation.



As noted by a contemporary, Bennett "combined science with showmanship" to convince the country that soil erosion was a serious problem that merited national attention. His efforts led to demonstration projects and ultimately to a conservation partnership that the nation enjoys today of science-based technical assistance and support from USDA, leadership from local conservation districts, and support from state conservation agencies for natural resource conservation on private land.

Born near Wadesboro, North Carolina, Bennett graduated from the University of North Carolina. He began his career as a soil surveyor for USDA. As he conducted soil surveys and investigated declining crop yields, he became convinced that soil erosion was a problem not just for farmers but also for rural economies.

By 1909, he was supervising soil surveys in the southern United States and studying soils abroad and in U.S. territories. He worked in Costa Rica and Panama (1909), Alaska (1914), and Cuba (1925-1926) and served on the Guatemala – Honduras Boundary Commission (1919).

Among his writings of the 1920s, none was more influential than *Soil Erosion: A National Menace*, a USDA bulletin which he co-authored in 1928. Bennett wrote steadily about soil erosion, with articles appearing in popular and scientific journals, including *Country Gentleman* and *Scientific Monthly*.

Largely in response to Bennett's campaign for soil conservation, Representative James P. Buchanan of Texas attached an amendment to the 1930 appropriations bill authorizing USDA to establish a series of soil erosion experiment stations. The Coon Creek Watershed Project, in southwestern Wisconsin, was the first of many watershed-based projects initiated to demonstrate soil conservation practices to farmers.

Bennett helped establish the Soil Erosion Service in the Department of the Interior and became its director in September 1933. The agency worked with farmers to demonstrate soil conservation methods in watershed-based demonstrations.

Bennett's speeches inspired action for soil conservation around the country, whether at farm-field demonstrations, scholarly gatherings, or in the Congress. When a dust storm from the Great Plains moved over Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1935 during the height of the Dust Bowl, Bennett was testifying before a Congressional committee on the bill that would create the Soil Conservation Service. He knew the storm was coming and used it to dramatically demonstrate the need for soil conservation.

The resulting Soil Conservation Act of April 27, 1935, created the Soil Conservation Service at USDA. Bennett served as its chief until he stepped down in 1951 and retired from federal service in 1952.

In 2000, Bennett was named a charter inductee into the USDA Hall of Heroes. During his lifetime, Bennett received many honors, including serving as president of the Association of American Geographers in 1943; receiving the Frances K. Hutchinson Award from the Garden Club of America in 1944, the Cullum Geographical Medal by the American Geographical Society in 1948, and the Distinguished Service Medal by the USDA and the Audubon Medal by the National Audubon Society, both in 1947. He was a fellow of the American Society of Agronomy, the American Geographical Society, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Soil Conservation Society of America.