

The Dust Bowl Packet

What Caused the Dust Bowl Assignment

Document A: Henderson Letter

Caroline Henderson started homesteading in the Oklahoma Panhandle in 1907. She was a published writer who wrote for various magazines. The passage below is an excerpt of a letter she wrote to Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace in 1935 at the age of 58. Wallace would later credit her with helping America understand farmers' problems and the courage they exhibited.

"For twenty-seven years this little spot on the vast expanses of the Great Plains has been the center of all our thought and hope and effort. And marvelous are the changes that we have seen . . . The almost unbroken buffalo grass sod has given way to cultivated fields. The old trails have become wide graded highways. Little towns have sprung up with attractive homes, trees, flowers, schools, churches, and hospitals. Automobiles and trucks, tractors and combines have revolutionized methods of farm work and manner of living. The wonderful crop of 1926 when our country alone produced 10,000,000 bushels of wheat – more it was said than any other equal area in the world – revealed the possibilities of our productive soil under modern methods of farming. It seemed as if at last our dreams were coming true. . .

Yet now our daily physical torture, confusion of mind, and gradual wearing down of courage, seem to make that long continued hope look like a vanishing dream. For we are in the worst of the dust storm area where "dust to eat" is not merely a figure of speech, but the phrasing of a bitter reality. . . .

In this time of severe stress, credit must be given to the various activities of the federal government. Without such aid as has been furnished, it seems certain that large sections must have been virtually abandoned. Yet common sense suggests that the regions which are no longer entirely self-supporting cannot rely indefinitely upon government aid. So the problem remains and the one satisfactory solution is beyond all human control. Some of our neighbors with small children, fearing the effects upon their health, have left temporarily "until it rains." Others have left permanently, thinking doubtless that nothing could be worse."

- Source: Caroline Henderson's letter to Henry A. Wallace, sent July 26, 1935

1. What type of document is this? When was it written? Why was it written?
2. According to Henderson, what are three changes that happened in Oklahoma during the 1910s and 1920s? What is her attitude about these changes?
3. How does the author describe life in Oklahoma in 1935? What are two examples of how people experienced the Dust Bowl?
4. How does this document help you address the question: What caused the Dust Bowl?

Document B: Svobida Account

Lawrence Svobida was a young farmer who came to Oklahoma in 1929 and farmed there until 1939. He suffered seven crop failures in eight years. When he left, he wrote an account of his struggles. He wanted to share the story of the “average farmer without sugar coating it,” as he claimed others had. Below are two excerpts from his account.

Excerpt 1:

The gales chopped off the plants even with the ground, then proceeded to take the roots out. They did not stop there. They blew away the rich topsoil, leaving the subsoil exposed: and then kept sweeping away the “hard-pan,” which is almost as hard as the concrete.

This was something new and different from anything I had ever experienced before – a destroying force beyond my wildest imaginings. When some of my own fields started blowing, I was utterly bewildered. . .

According to [my neighbors’] information, there was little hope of saving a crop once the wind had started blowing; and the only known method of checking the movement of the soil was the practice of strip listing. This meant running deep parallel furrows twenty or thirty feet apart, in an east and west direction, across the path of the prevailing winds. This tends to check the force of the wind along the ground and allows the fine silt-like dust to fall into the open furrows.

Excerpt 2:

There had been overgrazing before the coming of the settlers and the invasion of barbed wire, but the death knell of the Plains was sounded and the birth of the Great American Desert was inaugurated with the introduction and rapid improvement of power farming. Tractors and combines made the Great Plains regions a new wheat empire, but in doing so they disturbed nature’s balance, and nature is taking its revenge.

- Source: Lawrence Svobida, *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas*, first published in 1940.

1. Who wrote this document? When was it written? Why was it written?
2. According to Svobida, how did the dust and wind affect crops?
3. What exactly does Svobida mean by the phrase “power farming”? What would be the difference between traditional farming and “power farming”?
4. What, according to this Svobida, were two causes of the Dust Bowl?
5. How is Svobida’s account similar to and different from Henderson’s letter?

Document C: Government Report

The passage below is an excerpt from the Report on the Great Plains Drought Area Committee. This report was created by a government committee set up to analyze the causes of the Dust Bowl. Morris Cooke, Administrator of the Rural Electrification Administration, chaired the committee, but the leaders of eight federal agencies, including the Department of Agriculture and Soil Conservation Service, signed it. Personal and Confidential from Morris Cooke.

August 27, 1936

Dear Mr. President,

The Committee has made a preliminary study of drought conditions in the Great Plains area with the hope of outlining a long-term program which would render future droughts less disastrous. . .

The agricultural economy of the Great Plains will become increasingly unstable and unsafe, in view of the impossibility of permanent increase in the amount of rainfall, unless overcropping, overgrazing and improper farm methods are prevented. There is no reason to believe that the primary factors of climate temperature, precipitation and winds in the Great Plains region have undergone any fundamental change. The future of the region must depend, therefore, on the degree to which farming practices conform to natural conditions. Because the situation has now passed out of the individual farmer's control, the reorganization of farming practices demands the cooperation of many agencies, including the local, State, and Federal governments.

Mistaken public policies have been largely responsible for the situation now existing. The Federal Government must do its full share in remedying the damage caused by a mistaken homesteading policy, by the stimulation of war time demands which led to overcropping and overgrazing, and by encouragement of a system of agriculture which could not be both permanent and prosperous.

- Source: Excerpt from the Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee, sent to President Roosevelt on August 27, 1936

1. What kind of document is this? When was it written? Why was it written?
2. What problem is this report addressing?
3. What, according to this report, were three causes of the Dust Bowl?
4. Is this a reliable account? Why or why not?

Document D: Historian, Professor Donald Worster

Professor Donald Worster is a leader in the field of environmental history. He is a professor at the University of Kansas and has written several books on environmental topics. The excerpt below is from his book *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*.

The Dust Bowl took only 50 years to accomplish. . . . It came about because the culture was operating in precisely the way it was supposed to. Americans blazed their way across a richly endowed continent with a ruthless, devastating efficiency unmatched by any people anywhere. Some environmental catastrophes are nature's work, others are the slowly accumulating effects of ignorance or poverty. The Dust Bowl, in contrast, was the inevitable outcome of a culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself that task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth.

The Dust Bowl . . . came about because the expansionary energy of the U.S. had finally encountered a volatile, marginal land, destroying the delicate ecological balance that had evolved there. We speak of farmers and plows on the plains and the damage they did, but the language is inadequate. What brought them to the region was a social system, a set of values, an economic order. . . . Capitalism, it is my contention, had been the decisive factor in this nation's use of nature.

Source: Excerpt from Professor Donald Worster's book titled, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, published in 1979.

Document E: Historian, Professor R. Douglas Hurt

Professor R. Douglas Hurt is the head of the History Department at Purdue University. He has written numerous books on agricultural history. The excerpt below comes from his book *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History*.

Dust storms in the southern Great Plains, and indeed, in the Plains as a whole, were not unique to the 1930s . . . Many factors contributed to the creation of the Dust Bowl – soils subject to wind erosion, drought which killed the soil-holding vegetation, the incessant wind, and technological improvements which facilitated the rapid breaking of the native sod. The nature of southern Plains soils and periodic influence of drought could not be changed, but the technological abuse of the land could have been stopped. This is not to say that mechanized agriculture irreparably damaged the land – it did not. New and improved implements such as tractors, one-way disk plows, grain drills, and combines reduced plowing, planting, and harvesting costs and increased agricultural productivity. Increased productivity caused prices to fall, and farmers compensated by breaking more sod for wheat. At the same time, farmers gave little thought to using their new technology in ways that would conserve the soil.

Source: Excerpt from Professor R. Douglas Hurt's book titled, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History*, published in 1981.

1. What kind of documents are these? When were they written? Why were they written?
2. What does Professor Worster identify as the primary cause of the Dust Bowl?
3. Do the other documents support this conclusion? Why or why not?
4. What are 4 causes of the Dust Bowl that Professor Hurt identifies?
5. In what ways are Worster and Hurt's accounts different?

Document	Reason Suggested By This Doc	Evidence From Doc to Support
Henderson Letter		
Svobida Account		
Government Report		
Worster Excerpt		
Hurt Excerpt		

What Caused the Dust Bowl?

Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse
March 1934
Fields of Flashing Light

I heard the wind rise, and stumbled from my bed, down the stairs, out the front door, into the yard. The night sky kept flashing, lightning danced down on its spindly legs. I sensed it before I knew it was coming. I heard it, smelled it, tasted it. Dust. While Ma and Daddy slept, the dust came, tearing up fields where the winter wheat, set for harvest in June, stood helpless. I watched the plants, surviving after so much drought and so much wind, I watched them fry, or flatten, or blow away, like bits of cast-off rags. It wasn't until the dust turned toward the house, like a fired locomotive, and I fled, barefoot and breathless, back inside, it wasn't until the dust hissed against the windows, until it ratcheted the roof, that Daddy woke. He ran into the storm, his overalls half-hooked over his union suit. "Daddy!" I called. "You can't stop dust. Ma told me to cover the beds, push the scatter rugs against the doors, dampen the rags around the windows. Wiping dust out of everything, she made coffee and biscuits, waiting for Daddy to come in. Sometime after four, rubbing low on her back, Ma sank down into a chair at the kitchen table and covered her face. Daddy didn't come back for hours, not until the temperature dropped so low, it brought snow. Ma and I sighed, grateful, staring out at the dirty flakes, but our relief didn't last. The wind snatched that snow right off the fields, leaving behind a sea of dust, waves and waves and waves of dust, rippling across our yard. Daddy came in, he sat across from Ma and blew his nose. Mud streamed out. He coughed and spit out mud. If he had cried, his tears would have been mud too, but he didn't cry. And neither did Ma.

1. You will use the passage above to write an argumentative paragraph about the following: The dust storms made daily life difficult. The paragraph must be a minimum of six sentences and cite at least two pieces of information in the text above.

Music of the Dust Bowl

Woody Guthrie: I Ain't Got No Home In This World Anymore

I ain't got no home, I'm just a-roamin' 'round,
Just a wandrin' worker, I go from town to town.
And the police make it hard wherever I may go
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.

My brothers and my sisters are stranded on this road,
A hot and dusty road that a million feet have trod;
Rich man took my home and drove me from my door
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.

Was a-farmin' on the shares, and always I was poor;
My crops I lay into the banker's store.
My wife took down and died upon the cabin floor,
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.

I mined in your mines and I gathered in your corn
I been working, mister, since the day I was born
Now I worry all the time like I never did before
'Cause I ain't got no home in this world anymore

1. Explain what this song is about. Cite information from the song to support your position.
2. Write your own song or poem about the Dust Bowl. It must be a minimum of 12 bars/lines.

The Grapes of Wrath

Those families who had lived on a little piece of land, who had lived and died on forty acres, had eaten or starved on the produce of forty acres, had now the whole West to rove in. And they scampered about, looking for work; and the highways were streams of people, and the ditch banks were lines of people. . . . The great highways streamed with moving people. . . . And this was good, for wages went down and prices stayed up. The great owners were glad. . . . And wages went down and prices stayed up. And pretty soon now we'll have serfs again. . . . And the little farmers . . . lost their farms, and they were taken by the great owners, the banks, and the companies.

. . . As time went on, there were fewer farms. The little farmers moved into town for a while and exhausted their credit, exhausted their friends, their relatives. And then they too were on the highways. And the roads were crowded with men ravenous for work, murderous for work. And the companies, the banks worked at their own doom and they did not know it. The fields were fruitful, and starving men moved on the roads. . . . The great companies did not know that the line between hunger and anger is a thin line. . . . On the highways the people moved like ants and searched for work, for food. And the anger began to ferment.

by John Steinbeck

1. In the box below, draw an image based on the passage above.

