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Drought— But Not Dust Bowl

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In 2006, fears that the drought in South Dakota would be worse than that of the 1930s made the pages of the *New York Times* (1). Indeed, this 21st Century drought is serious but, in terms of sheer human misery, it doesn't match what was called the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression, and the Dirty Thirties.

Back when South Dakota State University was South Dakota A&M, rural sociologists conducted studies of the Dust Bowl, so now we can compare the two droughts.

“A Graphic Summary of the Relief Situation in South Dakota (1930-1935)” shows numbers of people on relief, number living on farms, banking, and off-farm income (3). The most striking finding concerns relief.

“South Dakota led all other states with respect to the percentage of total population on Relief (3: p 24).” In December 1934, 40% of South Dakota families were on relief. As W. Kumlien, the author of the report, reviewed the 56.5% of the population living on farms, his stark summary was, “In general, there seems to be a relationship between the parts of the state with the highest proportion of the population engaged in agriculture and the areas showing the greatest intensity of relief” (3: p 11).

Table 1 shows some of the changes between the Dust Bowl and the 21st Century. In 1935, 9 out of every 16 South Dakotans lived on a farm. Over 127,000 people worked on farms.

Although farming was the way of life for most South Dakotans, 56% had lived on the farm for less than 10 years. Initially they were attracted to cheap land, and the

state's new farmers grew accustomed to wet growing seasons and high grain prices during World War I. Families who left during the Dust Bowl were less rooted in their communities than today's farm families.

Kumlien found that 99.1% of those on relief during the Dust Bowl were white (3: p 60). The 1930 Census shows that 3.15% of South Dakota's population was American Indian. The 2000 Census shows 8.25% of South Dakotans are American Indian.

Today, less than 8% (58,240) of the state's population live on farms. Agriculture is still big but, as people moved into the city, other industries have surpassed it. Now, over half of South Dakotans are employed in retail (12.3%), health (13.3%), manufacturing (10.7%), and government jobs (19.0%).

Table 1. South Dakota demographic characteristics in the 1930s and 2000.

Statistical snap shots	Dust Bowl	21st Century	Changes
State population	688,500	754,800	+9.6%
Living on farms and ranches	397,300	58,200	-85.3%
West River total population	165,700	229,200	+38.3%
West River rural population	143,500	123,500	-8.6%
West River cities (>2500)	22,200	105,700	+476%
East River total population	522,800	525,600	+0.5%
East River rural population	418,300	242,900	-42.0%
East River cities (<2500)	106,400	282,700	+265%
Farms and ranches	83,303	31,736	-51.9%
Tractors on farms	30,972	94,737	+306%
Horse inventory	640,000	69,568	-89.1%
Electricity in house	9,070(11%)	31,700+(99%+)	+89.0%

In the 1920s and 1930s, banking depended on agricultural production. South Dakota agricultural land values dropped more than 50% in that decade, and the banks followed. In 1920, South Dakota had 695 banks. By 1935, only 212 banks remained. Rural communities depended on local banks, but few rural banks survived the Depression and Dust Bowl. Kumlien observed, “an epidemic of bank failures started in 1925 and by 1935 over two-thirds of all the banks in South Dakota had failed” (3: p. 8).

In 2007, there are 93 banks, with multiple branches and offices, in South Dakota. Today’s banks are larger than those of the 1930s, less dependent on agriculture, and now have the protection of Federal Deposit Insurance.

Off-farm income reduces farm susceptibility to drought and other disasters. “The off-farm income share of total household income of U.S. farmers rose from about 50% in 1960 to more than 80% over the past 10 years. ... On average, a farm household earned about \$48,800 from off-farm sources in 2004” (2: p 5).

Table 2 shows that differences between the two sides of the Missouri River go beyond climate, soil, and farm size. In 2002, West River ranchers were older and made less money (12). The average net income in West River counties was \$12,800 less than on the east side. Older operators and lower farm incomes put West River farms and ranches at higher risk of liquidation, even without drought. While South Dakota has 771 farms and ranches operated by American Indians, 660 of them (86%) are West River. Most (648) are located in or adjacent to counties with reservations.

Table 2. 2002 farm comparisons for East and West River.

	<i>South Dakota</i>	<i>East River</i>	<i>West River</i>
Farms, ranches	31,736	23,633	8,103
Rural population	362,908	247,876	115,032
Rural non-farm	304,668	203,330	101,338
Median age	53.3	53.0	57.6
Net loss (percent)	35.4%	32.9%	42.7%
Avg net income	\$28,448	\$31,700	\$18,900
Avg salary non-ag*	\$29,939	\$24,400	\$24,135

*Metropolitan areas excluded from calculation in East and West River columns. Average of county means better reflects available off-farm employment options.

On both sides of the river, the population has moved to the towns and cities, but more so in West River, where town and city residents have increased by 476% since the Dust Bowl. East River cities have more than doubled, increasing by 266%. Regardless of the river, at least 90% of rural residents are non-farm. While the opportunity to supplement farm income with off-farm wages is about the same, longer commuting distances make the expenses of off-farm employment higher for West River operations.

Conclusions

Is the 21st Century drought worse than the Dust Bowl?

Individuals may indeed find the present drought hard, but in the aggregate the answer is no. While future droughts may be as severe as during the Dust Bowl, fewer 21st Century South Dakotans depend on agriculture. In 1930, 56.5% of South Dakota’s population (over 390,000 people) lived on farms. In 2002, only 58,200 (7.7%) live on farms.

Drought is a problem, but South Dakota’s increased economic diversity reduces the impact. Today’s farmers have advantages unavailable during the Dust Bowl. Government programs provide support that did not exist in the 1930s. Mechanization removed the grazing pressure from a half-million horses and mules off pastures and ranches. Off-farm employment has increased options.

Times really were tougher during the Dust Bowl.

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