Prairie Under Pressure

Read a law and a later account to trace changes to the Great Plains.

8.G.5 "Using primary and secondary sources, identify ways people modified the physical environment as the United States developed, and describe the impacts that resulted."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two ways people changed the land. Number each underlined change and its matching impact with the same number so you can trace cause and effect.

Changing the Great Plains

1. In 1862, Congress passed the Homestead Act. This primary source, a law written at the time, offered eligible settlers up to 160 acres of public land if they lived on and cultivated it for five years. Its words called for "actual settlement and cultivation." The law shows what the government wanted settlers to do, but it does not describe every result. Much of the Great Plains land that officials called public was already used by Native nations. As settlers arrived, those nations faced growing pressure to leave their homelands.

2. A modern historian's account is a secondary source because it looks back at these events. It explains that settlers broke up deep-rooted prairie grasses to plant wheat and other crops. They also put up fences to mark fields and keep livestock in. Plowing created farmland and helped families grow food, but it left some soil less protected from wind. Fences divided grassland habitat and restricted the movement of wild animals, including bison. Farming and fencing also changed places where Native communities had hunted and traveled.

3. During the 1930s, severe drought struck parts of the Great Plains. On many heavily plowed fields, dry, loose topsoil blew away in huge dust storms. The same secondary account explains that this soil loss damaged crops and forced some families to move. Farmers and government workers responded by planting rows of trees called windbreaks along fields. The trees slowed the wind, helping soil stay in place. Read the two sources together: the law reveals a goal, while the later account traces changes to the land and their effects.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. What change to the land did the Homestead Act call for, and what does the secondary account say was one result of that change?

2. How did settlers use fences to change the land? Describe one impact on wild animals or Native communities.

3. How did plowing prairie grass affect fields when drought struck in the 1930s?

4. What did farmers and government workers add to fields after the dust storms, and what impact did it have?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write four sentences for a local history display. Propose a plan for a homestead that grows crops but leaves strips of native prairie unplowed, then use the law and the later account to explain one likely benefit and one possible cost of your plan.

ANSWER KEY

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GRADE 8 · 8.G.5

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two ways people changed the land. Number each underlined change and its matching impact with the same number so you can trace cause and effect. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	What change to the land did the Homestead Act call for, and what does the secondary account say was one result of that change?	**The law called for cultivation. Settlers plowed prairie grass to grow crops, which left some soil less protected from wind.**
2	How did settlers use fences to change the land? Describe one impact on wild animals or Native communities.	**Settlers fenced fields and livestock. The fences divided habitat and restricted the movement of animals such as bison.**
3	How did plowing prairie grass affect fields when drought struck in the 1930s?	**Plowing left some soil less protected from wind. During the drought, dry topsoil blew away from many heavily plowed fields.**
4	What did farmers and government workers add to fields after the dust storms, and what impact did it have?	**They planted rows of trees called windbreaks. The trees slowed the wind and helped soil stay in place.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The Homestead Act called for "actual settlement and cultivation," so a family could plant crops on part of its claim. I would leave wide strips of native prairie between smaller fields. Based on the later account, the unplowed grass might help hold soil when strong winds blow. The possible cost is less land for crops, so the family might harvest less food.

Accept other passage-supported impacts, including changes to places Native communities hunted and traveled. The law provides evidence of a government goal, not proof of the later environmental results.