When Soil Flew

Trace how land use and drought shaped the Dust Bowl migration.

OKH.C.7.2 "Describe the environmental devastation known as the Dust Bowl by analyzing the impact of environmental conditions and human mismanagement of natural resources which resulted in the migration of the farm workers and families..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two natural conditions and circle two human land-use choices. Then number these links in the passage: 1 for exposed soil, 2 for lost farm income, and 3 for migration west.

The Dust Bowl: Land, Wind, and Families

(1) In the 1930s, a farmer on the southern Great Plains might wake to a sky dark with blowing soil. Years of severe drought left the ground dry, and strong winds lifted loose topsoil into huge dust storms. These storms could blot out daylight, bury fences, and make breathing difficult. Crops failed as fields lost the fertile layer that plants need. Drought and wind were natural conditions, but they did not fully explain why so much soil blew away. To understand that damage, look at what had happened to the grasslands before the rain stopped.

(2) Native prairie grasses had deep roots that held soil in place, even during dry spells. During the early twentieth century, farmers plowed large areas of this grassland to grow wheat. High wheat prices during World War I encouraged expansion, and tractors made it easier to break more ground. Some farmers left fields bare after harvest or plowed land poorly suited to crops. When wheat prices fell, many tried to plant even more acres to earn enough money. Once drought arrived, exposed soil dried out and blew away. Human choices had stripped the land of much of its natural protection.

(3) The Dust Bowl damaged farms across parts of the Great Plains, including Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico. Dust storms and failed crops cut farm income, while debt and the loss of rented land pushed many families to leave. Some traveled west to California, hoping to find paid farm work. Migrants from Oklahoma and other Plains states were often called "Okies," sometimes as an insult. California offered jobs, but competition for seasonal work meant many newcomers faced low wages and difficult living conditions. Their journey shows how drought, wind, and decisions about land use combined to turn an environmental disaster into a human crisis.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did drought and wind turn exposed soil into a farming crisis?

2. Why did plowing prairie grass make the drought more damaging?

3. How could falling wheat prices make the Dust Bowl's soil damage worse?

4. How did damaged fields and economic pressures lead families west, and why was moving no guarantee of steady income?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a five- or six-sentence advisory note to a 1930s county official. Recommend one land-use change to reduce future dust storms and one way to help families who have lost income, explaining how each recommendation addresses a cause or effect described in the passage.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · OKH.C.7.2

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two natural conditions and circle two human land-use choices. Then number these links in the passage: 1 for exposed soil, 2 for lost farm income, and 3 for migration west. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did drought and wind turn exposed soil into a farming crisis?	**Drought dried the exposed soil, and wind blew away fertile topsoil. Crops then failed because fields had lost the soil plants needed.**
2	Why did plowing prairie grass make the drought more damaging?	**Plowing removed deep-rooted grasses that held soil in place, leaving more soil exposed to dry out and blow away.**
3	How could falling wheat prices make the Dust Bowl's soil damage worse?	**To earn enough money as prices fell, many farmers planted more acres. That meant more land was plowed and vulnerable to wind during drought.**
4	How did damaged fields and economic pressures lead families west, and why was moving no guarantee of steady income?	**Dust storms and failed crops cut income, while debt and loss of rented land pushed families to leave for possible farm work in California. Competition for seasonal jobs meant work could pay little or be hard to find.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

County officials should help farmers keep soil covered instead of leaving fields bare after harvest. Grass or other plants can hold soil in place, so drought and strong winds are less likely to carry it away. Officials could also offer paid work to families whose crops have failed. That income could help them stay housed while their fields recover, instead of forcing them to seek uncertain seasonal jobs far from home. These steps address both the damaged land and the lost income that pushed families to migrate.

Accept other feasible recommendations if the student explains how they address exposed soil or the economic pressures that led to migration. For the marking job, natural conditions include drought and strong winds; land-use choices include plowing grassland and leaving fields bare.