

Name: _____ Class: _____

Excerpt from 'On Drought Conditions'

By President Franklin Delano Roosevelt
1936

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945), also commonly known by his initials FDR, served as the 32nd President of the United States (1933-1945). He is known for his unprecedented four-term election and for his leadership in WWII. He also faced the "Dust Bowl" of the 1930s—during which severe drought and erosion conditions led to a prolonged agricultural crisis. As you read, take notes on both Roosevelt's plan to address the crisis as well as the rhetorical devices he uses to convey his message.

[1] I have been on a journey of husbandry¹. I went primarily to see at first hand conditions in the drought² states; to see how effectively Federal and local authorities are taking care of pressing problems of relief and also how they are to work together to defend the people of this country against the effects of future droughts.

I saw drought devastation in nine states.

I talked with families who had lost their wheat crop, lost their corn crop, lost their livestock³, lost the water in their well, lost their garden and come through to the end of the summer without one dollar of cash resources, facing a winter without feed or food—facing a planting season without seed to put in the ground.



"Dust Bowl" by U.S. Department of Agriculture is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

That was the extreme case, but there are thousands and thousands of families on western farms who share the same difficulties.

[5] I saw cattlemen who because of lack of grass or lack of winter feed have been compelled to sell all but their breeding stock⁴ and will need help to carry even these through the coming winter. I saw livestock kept alive only because water had been brought to them long distances in tank cars. I saw other farm families who have not lost everything but who, because they have made only partial crops, must have some form of help if they are to continue farming next spring.

I shall never forget the fields of wheat so blasted by heat that they cannot be harvested. I shall never forget field after field of corn stunted, earless and stripped of leaves, for what the sun left the grasshoppers took. I saw brown pastures which would not keep a cow on fifty acres.

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1. **Husbandry (noun):** conservation of resources; the cultivation or production of plants and/or animals--agriculture
 2. **Drought (noun):** a prolonged period of abnormally low rainfall; a shortage of water resulting from this
 3. **Livestock (noun):** domesticated animals raised in an agricultural setting to produce commodities such as food, fiber and labor
 4. "Breeding stock" refers to the livestock animals kept for reproduction, and not to be used for food or fiber.

Yet I would not have you think for a single minute that there is permanent disaster in these drought regions, or that the picture I saw meant depopulating these areas. No cracked earth, no blistering sun, no burning wind, no grasshoppers, are a permanent match for the indomitable American farmers and stockmen and their wives and children who have carried on through desperate days, and inspire us with their self-reliance, their tenacity⁵ and their courage. It was their fathers' task to make homes; it is their task to keep those homes; it is our task to help them with their fight.

First let me talk for a minute about this autumn and the coming winter. We have the option, in the case of families who need actual subsistence, of putting them on the dole⁶ or putting them to work. They do not want to go on the dole and they are one thousand percent right. We agree, therefore, that we must put them to work for a decent wage, and when we reach that decision we kill two birds with one stone, because these families will earn enough by working, not only to subsist themselves, but to buy food for their stock, and seed for next year's planting. Into this scheme of things there fit of course the government lending agencies which next year, as in the past, will help with production loans.

Every Governor with whom I have talked is in full accord with this program of doing work for these farm families, just as every Governor agrees that the individual states will take care of their unemployables but that the cost of employing those who are entirely able and willing to work must be borne by the Federal Government.

- [10] If then we know, as we do today, the approximate number of farm families who will require some form of work relief from now on through the winter, we face the question of what kind of work they should do. Let me make it clear that this is not a new question because it has already been answered to a greater or less extent in every one of the drought communities. Beginning in 1934, when we also had serious drought conditions, the state and Federal governments cooperated in planning a large number of projects—many of them directly aimed at the alleviation⁷ of future drought conditions. In accordance with that program literally thousands of ponds or small reservoirs have been built in order to supply water for stock and to lift the level of the underground water to protect wells from going dry. Thousands of wells have been drilled or deepened; community lakes have been created and irrigation projects are being pushed...

Spending like this is not waste. It would spell future waste if we did not spend for such things now. These emergency work projects provide money to buy food and clothing for the winter; they keep the livestock on the farm; they provide seed for a new crop, and, best of all, they will conserve soil and water in the future in those areas most frequently hit by drought.

If, for example, in some local area the water table continues to drop and the topsoil to blow away, the land values will disappear with the water and the soil. People on the farms will drift into the nearby cities; the cities will have no farm trade and the workers in the city factories and stores will have no jobs. Property values in the cities will decline. If, on the other hand, the farms within that area remain as farms with better water supply and no erosion, the farm population will stay on the land and prosper and the nearby cities will prosper too. Property values will increase instead of disappearing. That is why it is worth our while as a nation to spend money in order to save money.

5. **Tenacity** (*noun*): persistence or strong resolve

6. "on the dole" is a term closely relating to welfare or charity; in other words, giving the needy person or family a distribution of food, money, etc.

7. **Alleviation** (*noun*): to make more bearable; relief, improvement

I have, however, used the argument in relation only to a small area—it holds good in its effect on the nation as a whole. Every state in the drought area is now doing and always will do business with every state outside it. The very existence of the men and women working in the clothing factories of New York, making clothes worn by farmers and their families; of the workers in the steel mills in Pittsburgh, in the automobile factories of Detroit, and in the harvester factories of Illinois, depend upon the farmers' ability to purchase the commodities they produce. In the same way it is the purchasing power of the workers in these factories in the cities that enables them and their wives and children to eat more beef, more pork, more wheat, more corn, more fruit and more dairy products, and to buy more clothing made from cotton, wool and leather. In a physical and a property sense, as well as in a spiritual sense, we are members one of another.

I want to make it clear that no simple panacea⁸ can be applied to the drought problem in the whole of the drought area. Plans must depend on local conditions, for these vary with annual rainfall, soil characteristics, altitude and topography⁹. Water and soil conservation¹⁰ methods may differ in one county from those in an adjoining county. Work to be done in the cattle and sheep country differs in type from work in the wheat country or work in the Corn Belt.

- [15] The Great Plains Drought Area Committee has given me its preliminary recommendations for a long-time program for that region. Using that report as a basis we are cooperating successfully and in entire accord with the Governors and state planning boards. As we get this program into operation the people more and more will be able to maintain themselves securely on the land. That will mean a steady decline in the relief burdens which the Federal Government and states have had to assume in time of drought; but, more important, it will mean a greater contribution to general national prosperity by these regions which have been hit by drought. It will conserve and improve not only property values, but human values. The people in the drought area do not want to be dependent on Federal, state or any other kind of charity. They want for themselves and their families an opportunity to share fairly by their own efforts in the progress of America.

The farmers of America want a sound national agricultural policy in which a permanent land use program will have an important place. They want assurance against another year like 1932 when they made good crops but had to sell them for prices that meant ruin just as surely as did the drought. Sound policy must maintain farm prices in good crop years as well as in bad crop years. It must function when we have drought; it must also function when we have bumper crops¹¹ ...

In the drought area people are not afraid to use new methods to meet changes in Nature, and to correct mistakes of the past. If overgrazing¹² has injured range lands, they are willing to reduce the grazing. If certain wheat lands should be returned to pasture they are willing to cooperate. If trees should be planted as windbreaks or to stop erosion they will work with us. If terracing or summer fallowing¹³ or crop rotation¹⁴ is called for, they will carry them out. They stand ready to fit, and not to fight, the ways of Nature.

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8. **Panacea (noun):** a remedy for all ills or difficulties; a universal solution
 9. **Topography (noun):** graphic delineation of natural and man-made environmental features, especially in a way to show their relative positions and elevations
 10. **Conservation (noun):** a careful preservation or protection of something, especially natural resources
 11. "Bumper crop" refers to a large harvest
 12. Overgrazing occurs when plants are exposed to intensive grazing (allowing livestock to feed) for extended periods of time, or without sufficient recovery periods.
 13. **Fallow (verb):** to leave land unplanted for a period in order to restore its fertility
 14. Terracing, summer fallowing, and crop rotation are techniques used to prevent erosion and/or to promote fertile soil.

We are helping, and shall continue to help the farmer to do those things, through local soil conservation committees and other cooperative local, state and federal agencies of government...

With this fine help we are tiding over the present emergency. We are going to conserve soil, conserve water and conserve life. We are going to have long-time defenses against both low prices and drought. We are going to have a farm policy that will serve the national welfare. That is our hope for the future.

Excerpt from 'On Drought Conditions' by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt is in the public domain.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. How does FDR utilize imagery in the opening of the text?
 - A. He describes the agricultural destruction he's seen on his tour, emphasizing the impact it has had on the farmers and the environment, setting up his plan for conservation.
 - B. He describes the potential future improvements on the American landscape.
 - C. He recalls past fertile farmlands in order to give his audience hope of recovering this prosperity.
 - D. He describes the agricultural destruction he's seen on his tour, appealing to his audience by assuring them that he has seen the drought for himself.

2. In paragraphs 5-6, FDR begins most of his sentences with the words "I saw;" Why is this structure effective in helping FDR convey his message?
 - A. It proposes a specific set of actions to remedy the people's plight.
 - B. It emphasizes the prevalence of the countless hardships that FDR witnessed out west.
 - C. It points out FDR's role in the government's negligence in responding to the drought.
 - D. It contrasts the farmers' situation with that of people in urban communities.

3. PART A: What does the word "indomitable" mean as used in paragraph 7?
 - A. Having experienced great suffering
 - B. Not easily defeated
 - C. Gifted and talented
 - D. Destitute and needy

4. PART B: Which phrase from the text provides the best support for the answer to Part A?
 - A. "permanent disaster in these drought regions"
 - B. "inspire us"
 - C. "carried on through desperate days"
 - D. "our task to help them with their fight"

5. FDR says that the families in need don't want to be "on the dole." How does this claim contribute to his larger point of view on American labor and work ethic? Cite evidence in your answer.
