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Return of the Dust Bowl

The parched prairies of the Midwest are facing a natural disaster not seen since the 'dusters' of the 1930s

DAVID USBORNE | KEYES, OKLAHOMA | SATURDAY 11 AUGUST 2012

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The jam jar sitting on John Vannatta's kitchen table appears to be filled with coffee, until he shows you the label on the lid. The preserve inside is history, saved from a time when black blizzards filled the sky, turning day into night; a time when Americans starved. "Pure 1930s Blow Dirt," it reads. It might also say: don't forget, lest it happens again.

Not that Mr Vannatta, 92 – or his neighbour Huston Hanes – needs reminding. Both retired farmers, they are members of a very small club indeed: the last survivors of that great American epic, the Dust Bowl, that spanned 1932 to 1936 and coincided with the Great Depression.

Mr Vannatta found the dust on rafters in an old barn 10 years ago and knew at once what it was. When the storms they called "dusters" roared through, vacuuming whole fields to the heavens, this is the dust they left behind, choking the lungs of grown men and burying trees to their highest limbs.

Brought together by a reporter, the two neighbours in Keyes, a small and parched farming town in the Oklahoma Panhandle, ponder not just the past, but

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also the present. Drought is again stalking the Panhandle, a two-by-four stick of territory on the map so flat and so lonely that it goes by the name "No Man's Land". It has been more like a furnace here of late than either can remember, more even than when the dusters came. And they both agree the Dust Bowl, or something close to it, could happen again.

"We would have hot days, of course," says Mr Hanes, his hands wider than a baseball glove, as he recalls the Dust Bowl, an environmental catastrophe that would be blamed not just on the perniciousness of nature but also on the greed of men. It followed the wheat rush of the late 1920s when farmers ripped up millions of acres of buffalo grass and left loose topsoil exposed. "Those days were hot, but..."

They nod at one another. The recent string of afternoons when the thermometer has broken through 100 degrees Fahrenheit (nearly 38C) here is something new.

They also know they are not alone. This week we learnt that July 2012 was the hottest month the US has had since records began in 1895. The average temperature across the 48 contiguous states was 77.6 degrees Fahrenheit, 3.3 degrees above the 20th-century average.

But it's the loss of moisture that is causing the greatest concern. Half of all the counties in the US have been declared disaster zones, and drought of varying intensity now grips two-thirds of the nation, drying out rivers, scorching crops and forcing cattle farmers to sell herds they can no longer feed.

It will take more than the current drought – some relief is forecast for parts of the upper Midwest this weekend – to impress these men. "I didn't think it was ever going to rain again," Mr Vannatta recalls of the early Thirties. "It was so dark back then, I never did see a single rain in years that was anything more than a sprinkle." About the only precipitation he and Mr Hanes did see was the soil dropped by the dusters.

One of the first rolled through on a summer's day in 1932 just as Mr Vannatta, his mother and his uncle had crossed the Kansas line on their way to see relatives in Ohio. "It was so dark you couldn't see the front of the hood of the car, it was just black," he remembers. "We just kind of backed off into the ditch. When it finally started to clear we saw if we had backed up any further we would have run off into a lake."

Mr Hanes perhaps had a luckier escape still. When the worst duster of all struck on 14 April 1935 – Black Sunday as it became known – he, aged 11, and his father were driving tractors side by side in the fields. "The sky started to boil... we jumped into our pick-up. It got so dark I couldn't see him sitting next to me." With no daylight at all, the two of them followed a fence to a nearby barn and then later made it to their small house. "We got to the back door of the house and mum had everyone with wet rags over the faces. We knew we were well protected then."

Neither man can see a repeat of the Dust Bowl in all its agony – federal farm subsidies and the social safety net make hunger on that scale unimaginable now. But they do see dangerous patterns returning, both in the weather and in agricultural practices. Whereas the federal government has for decades paid farmers to put fields back down to grass to bind the soil down, farmers who are putting profit over caution are now rushing to turn the sod over again.

If prices were to plummet, as they did at the start of the Depression, the land would once again be bare and vulnerable.

"I am worried," Mr Hanes concedes gravely. "If you just drive along you can see how they are just ploughing up grass everywhere. When the drought comes and the land is open like that it is going to be subject to wind erosion again. If you get one field blowing, that accumulates on another and then it just keeps advancing."

At the No Man's Land Museum in Goodwell, 30 miles southeast of Keyes, which houses photographs and artefacts from the Dust Bowl days, Sue Weissinger, the director, says it is the failure of rain-starved Midwestern crops this year that is

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pushing up prices and thus driving farmers to speed up cultivation.

She too hears alarm bells. "I am afraid that they are going to rush to plant more around here. More and more land is getting ploughed up and that increases the danger that we will go back. I see that happening and that is exactly what happened in the Dust Bowl days."

In the museum we discuss where global warming fits in to this year's weather and wonder, if it worsens, whether it could also push all the southern Plains back to Dust Bowl conditions? Ms Weissinger flinches but then nods. "I do think it points to global warming, but that is not a point of view that is popular around here. A lot of people don't want to believe it." That reluctance is not just political, she adds, but born directly from the memories of the Dust Bowl.

"A lot of the old people here will still tell you that they were not at fault. It's hard for them to take responsibility."

Back in Keyes, however, Huston Hanes says it is time to recognise man's impact on the climate. "I don't think there is any question that we are affecting the weather patterns," he says. "Our weather is changing. We don't get rains any more like we used to and we don't get snows like we used to. So something has changed."

Mr Hanes doesn't expect it in his lifetime, but a time might come when the dust drops from the Panhandle sky all over again.

Thirties disaster

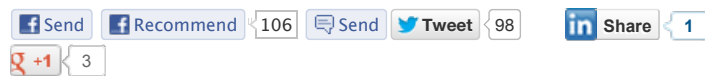
7,000 people moved out of the regions affected.

2.5m people moved out of the regions affected.

75% of topsoil was lost by the end of the 1930s.

100,000,000 acres of land was affected by the dust storms.

500,000 Americans were left homeless



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Wynford7er · a day ago

Same mistake repeated since the dawn of civilization;

chop down too many trees, plough up too much or unsuitable grassland, to plant more grain and the soil gets blown away.

A good example is North Africa and the Middle East (you know, those places which you drop the bombs on) which were major grain producing areas during Roman times, they're not now. Mostly desert and semi-desert for the last few centuries.

Either learn the lesson for once and for all and apply it or find us another habitable planet before its too late please!

47 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Christopher Haslett · 14 hours ago · parent

Amazing though, how often British commenters forget what Britain did to its own environment.

6 ^ | 2 v · Reply · Share ›



Wynford7er · 11 hours ago · parent

I have not forgotten and don't claim any nationalistic supremacy on this issue. Fortunately, the UK has mostly resilient soils and is, consequently, mostly still productive apart from some upland areas. Many of these have been planted with rows of non-native trees, a bad idea. That does not detract from the fact that huge swathes of the world with poor soils are deserts in the making.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Slow Water Movement · 10 hours ago · parent

not deserts. deserts are unique and harshly beautiful ecosystems with animals and plants that have amazing adaptations to deal with the harsh environment.

What we are making, and continue to make, are wastelands... a very different thing altogether. Maybe they will turn into deserts, but not in our lifetime.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



paracetamol · 8 hours ago · parent

@**Slow Water Movement**: its life jim...but not as we know it...

0 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



evad666 · a day ago · parent

Sadly we stopped trying to spread ourselves around the solar system.

8 ^ | 3 v · Reply · Share ›



Flash_harry · 21 hours ago · parent

What other planet exactly?

9 ^ | 1 v · Reply · Share ›



FrankSW · a day ago · parent

There not many trees to chop down, this was previously a vast area of largely featureless grassland where the moisture levels were always too low

where the moisture levels were always too low to support trees. This was where the buffalo and the indians roamed free until the mid-late 1800's

And as for the desert of Africa, with warming temperatures comes increased atmospheric moisture, and as a result the area of desert has been reducing.

6 ^ | 5 v · Reply · Share >



Peter Connell · 20 hours ago · parent

The gopher created the grassland.

1 ^ | 3 v · Reply · Share >



Flash_harry · 21 hours ago

Of course according to the legion of Christian evangelists coming out of the woodwork, this is divine punishment for embracing evil like gay marriage and socialist medicare - not for driving 10 mpg hummers.

The only good news it may affect the price of corn, the ubiquitous additive in all parts of American diet from cokes to corn fed cattle as they wait in feeding lots before becoming big macs . In the 1930s obesity was not a problem, in fact the reduced diet improved longevity.

32 ^ | 1 v · Reply · Share >



derekcolman · 19 hours ago

Ironically, it is probably the wish to cash in on the high demand for grain to make biofuel that is motivating the farmers who are ploughing up grassland.

18 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Jaitch · a day ago

Not so very long ago, before travel was the norm, people within the same community would inter-marry and after a few generations of this, people got 'weak in the brain' - not enough genes in the gene pool.

Today we have Monsanto, and one other company, weakening the gene pool by messing with it.

In France they were found Guilty of poisoning food. A French court decided that GMO crops monster Monsanto was guilty of chemically poisoning a French farmer.

The grain grower, Paul Francois, says he developed neurological problems such as memory loss and headaches after being exposed to

Monsanto's Lasso weedkiller back in 2004.

Tom Philpott is an American investigative reporter who focusses on food. He is not a rabid fanatic, but I do wonder he think of what's left fit to eat.

Monsanto's supposedly drought-resistant corn isn't up to the task of fixing the problem. They are investigating it. One good thing is that the drought in the USA is everywhere so Monsanto will have no shortage of test sites. Read < [current DOT com/groups/news-blog/93701960_monsanto-introduces-drought-resistant-corn-despite-big-concerns.htm](http://current.DOT.com/groups/news-blog/93701960_monsanto-introduces-drought-resistant-corn-despite-big-concerns.htm) >.

22 ^ | 3 v · Reply · Share >



Old Git Tom · 2 hours ago · parent

Jaitch,

right on! If satanic governments do not finish us all short-term with WWII, monkeying with the genetics of our food will likely do the job slower. Monster Monsanto et al claw for profits. They seem the image of our species: too dumb to survive. OGT

0 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Fool_Britania · 12 hours ago

Amazing, these guys don't even rotate crops.

We were taught in school that rotating crops balanced the soil and we were encouraged to do it in our small squares of land at school.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



mitchell_n_beard · a day ago

Who is the modern Steinbeck to chronicle what's happening today

18 ^ | 1 v · Reply · Share >



hodgeey · 19 hours ago

John Steinbeck and Woody Guthrie - didn't anyone read Grapes of Wrath or listen to the Dustbowl Ballads?

9 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Useanameplease · a day ago

you reap what you sow

10 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Jaitch · a day ago · parent

Very true, Today that is GM foods.

12 ^ | 2 v · Reply · Share >



evad666 · a day ago

Are these the same grasslands which sit on sand dunes?

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Cool Breeze · 3 hours ago

Exterminate 90% of humans. Thats the best solution of all.

0 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Gr8Dane · 7 hours ago

This has little to do with plowing, tree removal or over-working the ground. What this is about is geo-engineering - the global warming scheme to control weather. This has been on the books for the last 35 years, and is now being negotiated behind closed doors of the government without our input or knowledge. So before you dismiss this as the rantings of a "conspiracy theorist" spend some time researching the over 160 patents filed for weather modification. Check out HAARP or David Kieth's clear statements about how "some will win and some will lose in getting rain. He is one of the premier Geo Engineers. Weather of

this nature is unprecedented because it is manipulated - follow the money! Finally remember this - if you control the weather - you control the food - if you control the food - you control the people. The edust bow of the 30's was real - and it was nature at it worst - this is the government at its worst.

1 ^ | 1 v · Reply · Share >



Old Git Tom · 2 hours ago · parent

Gr8Dane,

you are correct & the MSM collude in ignoring secret government black projects. The geopolitical uses of weather modification have been identified in several published 'defence' reports. It seems the weather is now being modified covertly; or 'meddled with' is probably more accurate.

Deep in Washington, a team of Dr Strangeloves is likely calculating where, & how many, millions of brown people are going to starve to death in the Great Cull. They will blame MMGW, & put up our energy prices, to the enormous benefit of Al Gore & Fred Rothschild's carbon-trading scam. OGT

0 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



themardler · 8 hours ago

I thought some of the desertification of Northern Africa was down to the shifting rainfall patterns as we progress through the current warm interglacial phase, not just land use. Land use might cause erosion but can't be the sole cause of rivers ceasing to flow and lakes drying up but as you say, goats champing away has not helped. The Breckland of Norfolk and Suffolk was supposed to have been cleared of trees by Neolithic farmers and the low rainfall of around 24 inches a year meant blowing sand and rough heath fit only for rabbits until the Forestry commission planted trees in the 20th Century.. Irrigation makes it viable arable land but the soil still blows if there is a dry spring before crops are established, as it does in the peat fens.

0 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Nico de Jongh · 9 hours ago

Also take into consideration the sun is at peak of 11 year cycle and the cosmic constellation align around 21/12/2012. Magnetic fields and sun radiation - we have no control. Might see you in a restaurant at end of the universe -2112.

2 ^ | 2 v · Reply · Share >



FrankSW · a day ago

Well here we go again.....it's HOOOT somewhere in the world (there is always somewhere, just as it's cooler and wetter elsewhere at the same time) so it must be global warming.

Memory is a fickle thing and when you quote the old timer who says "Those days were hot, but..."....then the thermometer has broken through 100 degrees Fahrenheit (nearly 38C) here is something new.

It's not new, it was hotter back then, and not just one year but over several years. Most of the state temperature record highs

such as 115F, 125F, 109F, 134F set during that decade have never been beaten since (Source NOAA).

Of course that is at odds with the "homogenised" temperature graphs that the NOAA supply today which now show the 30's to be colder, was the dust bowl a figment of our imagination or just an inconvenient truth?

9 ^ | 17 v · Reply · Share >



Squiggle · 18 hours ago · parent

You know, it's quite possible to take global averages. That's one of the key differences between weather and climate. The trend in global averages is inexorably up, in a way it has never been before. Of course localized extreme events have happened before. It's the global trend that matters.

13 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



René Martin · 16 hours ago · parent

You're in denial, the climate is changing everywhere. I don't care if it is caused by human beings, the sun, or pothead pixies, but the effects are clearly visible

10 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

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DaveCrouch — I see that you are well named. Firstly the gas didn't claim anything at all, it was the operator, To...

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