In the years after World War I, farmers faced tough times. Most Americans were living in good fortune in the 1920s, but for the American farmer, the Great Depression began early.

In the 1920s, many farmers found themselves in a continual cycle of debt. Their money problems stemmed from falling farm prices and the need to purchase expensive machinery. When the stock market crashed in 1929, sending prices in an even more downward cycle, many American farmers wondered if their hardscrabble lives would ever improve.

**Agricultural Adjustment Administration is introduced**

The first major project of the New Deal, an ambitious set of laws passed during the Great Depression, aimed to help farmers by raising farm prices to the levels they were at from 1909-14. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration was created for this purpose. One method of driving up prices is to limit supply. Simply put, if farmers produced less, the prices of their crops and livestock would increase.
The AAA identified seven basic farm products: wheat, cotton, corn, tobacco, rice, hogs and milk. Farmers who produced these goods were paid by the AAA to reduce the number of acres that crops were grown on or the amount of livestock raised. In other words, farmers were paid to farm less!

Newspapers and the public immediately cried foul. To meet the demands set by the AAA, farmers plowed under millions of acres of already planted crops. Six million young pigs were slaughtered to meet the guidelines. In a time when many were out of work and tens of thousands were starving, this wastefulness was considered downright wrong.

Nevertheless, farm income did increase under the AAA. Cotton, wheat and corn prices doubled in three years. Despite having misgivings about working with the government, farmers overwhelmingly approved of the program.

**Sharecropping system disappears**

Unfortunately, the benefits did not trickle down to the poorest. Farmers who didn't own the land they worked on did not receive government aid — instead the government dollars went to their landlords. The owners often bought better machinery with the money, which further reduced the need for farm workers.

The Supreme Court put an end to the AAA in 1936, by declaring it unconstitutional. At this time, President Franklin Roosevelt's administration decided to repackage parts of the program to try to save the environment. Not only were farmers in the 1920s facing an economic depression, they were also up against an environmental crisis. After years and years of plowing and planting, much of the soil of the Great Plains had become depleted and weak. Winds blew clouds of dust that fell like brown snow across the region as residents of the "Dust Bowl" moved west in search of better times.

**Billowing clouds of dust**

Between 1930 and 1940, the southwestern Great Plains region of the United States suffered a severe drought. Once a semi-dry grassland, the treeless plains became home to thousands of settlers when, in 1862, Congress passed the Homestead Act. Most of the settlers farmed their land or grazed cattle. The farmers plowed the prairie grasses and planted dryland wheat. As the demand for wheat products grew, cattle grazing was reduced, and millions more acres were plowed and planted.

Dryland farming on the Great Plains led to the eventual destruction of the prairie grasses. Gradually, the land was laid bare, and significant environmental damage began to occur. Among the natural elements, the strong winds of the region were particularly devastating.

With the onset of drought in 1930, the over-farmed and over-grazed land began to blow away. Winds whipped across the plains, raising billowing clouds of dust. The sky could darken for days, and even well-sealed homes could end up with a thick layer of dust on the furniture. In some places, the dust drifted like snow, covering farm buildings and houses. The crisis
affected 19 states in the heartland of the United States. With no chance of making a living, farm families abandoned their homes and land in these areas, fleeing westward to become migrant laborers.

In all, 400,000 people left the Great Plains, victims of the combined action of severe drought and poor soil conservation practices. In his 1939 book "The Grapes of Wrath," author John Steinbeck described the flight of some of these families: "They streamed over the mountains, hungry and restless — restless as ants, scurrying to find work to do — to lift, to push, to pick, to cut — anything, any burden to bear, for food. The kids are hungry. We got no place to live. Like ants scurrying for work, for food, and most of all for land."

**Desperate times and desperate measures**

The Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act paid farmers to plant clover and alfalfa instead of wheat and corn. These crops help restore the soil so that other crops can be grown in it in the future. At the same time, the government achieved its goal of reducing the land farmers were using to grow underpriced goods.

Another major problem faced by American farmers had to do with mortgages. A mortgage is a loan a family can take out to buy a home. It was becoming harder for farmers to keep up with the monthly payments on their mortgages, and many ended up losing their property to the banks in a process called a foreclosure. Across the Corn Belt of the Midwest, the situation grew desperate. Farmers pooled money to bail out needy friends. Minnesota and North Dakota passed laws restricting farm foreclosures. In Le Mars, Iowa, an angry mob beat a foreclosing judge almost to death in April 1933.

FDR intended to stop the madness. The Farm Credit Act, passed in March 1933, helped farmers avoid foreclosures. The Frazier-Lemke Farm Bankruptcy Act helped farmers buy back lost land.

While these laws and government programs helped ease some of the burdens on American farmers in the 1920s and '30s, times continued to be tough. America would not fully recover from the Great Depression until the 1940s.