

Disasters

The Stories We Share

What is a disaster?

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) defines a disaster as “An occurrence of a natural catastrophe, technological accident, or human caused event that has resulted in severe property damage, deaths, and/or multiple injuries.”

What is a hazard?

A hazard refers to a disaster with the potential to cause harm. Natural hazards include earthquakes, volcanos, floods, wildfires, severe weather, and climate change. Hazard events can be classified as emergencies, disasters, or catastrophes based on their impacts, resulting needs, who’s involved, how they are handled.

What is a natural disaster?

A natural disaster is the effect of a natural hazard, particularly when the hazard affects large numbers of people or property.

The role of people

People are central to what we consider a “disaster.” Natural hazards can and do take place regularly without affecting people, but a disaster is the result of the hazard’s interaction with humans. Because the number of people (or amount of property) affected by a disaster is integral to the definition of a disaster, people really are central to the definition.



Dust storm, Elkhart, Kan., May 1937. | Courtesy of Library of Congress



Abandoned farm in the dust bowl area, Oklahoma. | Rothstein, Arthur, 1935-1936; photographer, 1936-Apr.

The Dust Bowl

The Dust Bowl was a series of economic, agricultural, and natural events taking place between 1934-1940.

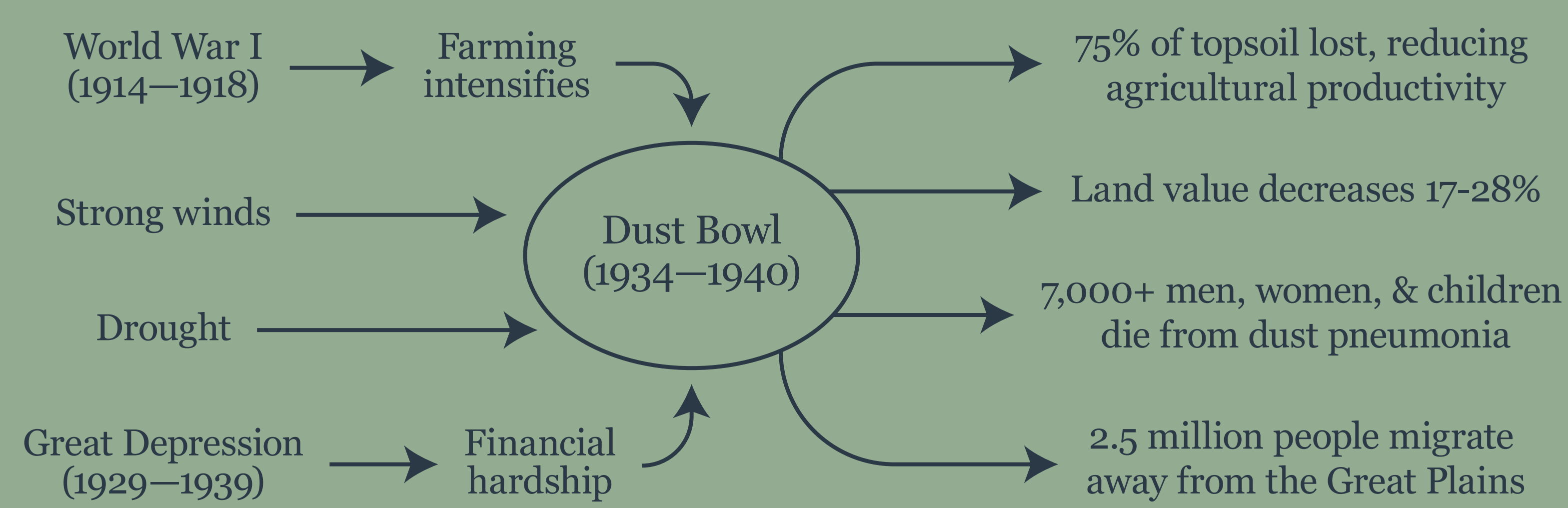
Large areas of the Great Plains had been converted to farmland, and World War I increased the need for wheat, intensifying cultivation efforts. This removed the deep-rooted grass that held the soil in place. When a drought and strong winds hit the area it resulted in massive clouds of dust—some so thick people suffocated.

One 1934 storm moved 12 million pounds of dust from the plains to Chicago.

The drought affected 100,000,000 acres of Texas, Oklahoma, South Dakota and sections of New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. The loss of topsoil needed for farming, and previous economic losses due to the Great Depression, led many people to abandon their farms and move to other states.

Impacts

Disasters involve complex interactions between the social, economic, and natural world. Disasters can be caused by many factors and can, in turn, have many impacts.



Edward (eddy), Kan. Soil blown by dust bowl winds piled up in large drifts on a farm. | Rothstein, Arthur, 1935-1936; photographer, 1936-March



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