**Fighting desertification**

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You grab the duct tape and sprint to the windows in an attempt to seal them from the wind that blows in heavy dust and dirt. But your attempts at prevention are ineffective, yet again. You smother Vaseline inside your nostrils, hoping the moisture will catch the dust particles before they irritate your lungs. As you shelter from the dust storm, you feel the ache in your stomach from the lack of food. Crops have been failing due to the ferocity of the wind, and the sky is dark black from the dust clouds that hang overhead. Not a single ray of sunshine has broken through the complete obscurity in weeks.

This description is not a dystopian imagining of a far-off future. It’s a real firsthand account from a farmer who lived in Oklahoma during the years of the 1930s Dust Bowl, one the most devastating natural disasters in US history.

The Dust Bowl wasn’t just the result of drought; it was driven by unsustainable land use practices, including the removal of native grasses and over-plowing for agriculture. What followed was environmental devastation, economic collapse, and the displacement of millions. This period remains a dark reminder of what happens when land is mismanaged, and its lessons are more relevant than ever as the world faces the growing crisis of desertification.

Desertification is the degradation of dry lands that receive limited rainfall (known as arid and semi-arid lands). Degradation occurs when unsustainable land use practices, such as overgrazing, deforestation, drainage of wetlands, and intensive farming, strip the land of its natural vegetation, leaving the soil exposed and vulnerable to erosion.

The world’s largest forum for addressing desertification, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP16), is taking place right now in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. And while you may not have heard of it – given the competition with recent headlines – it comes at a pivotal time for the United States. With the incoming Trump administration looking set to block and reverse climate measures that would otherwise prevent another Dust Bowl event, America’s land, and communities, hang in the balance.

Desertification in Your Backyard

While the UNCCD COP16 is focusing on tackling the issue of desertification on a global scale, for the US, the problem hits much closer to home than many might realize.

Desertification impacts more than 30% of land in the US States such as California, Arizona, and Nevada are already grappling with land degradation caused by drought and unsustainable agricultural practices. As the impacts of climate change intensify, the risks to these regions will only grow, creating the exact ingredients for another Dust Bowl to take place.

But we don’t need to merely speculate about the future consequences of land degradation – this past year, natural disasters have shown how degraded landscapes amplify the devastating effects of extreme weather in the here and now. When land degrades, it loses the ability to retain water and nutrients. This exacerbates drought conditions and increases the risk of wildfires, like those that ravage the Pacific Northwest so often that a period of the year is termed “wildfire season.” Degraded soils also worsen flooding due to their inability to retain water, leading to destructive floods like those witnessed in Florida and North Carolina in October.

On a global scale, land degradation impacts as much as 40% of the world’s land area, affecting more than 3.2 billion people. While desertification in distant regions like Spain or sub-Saharan Africa may seem unrelated to American lives, the reality is that the effects are far from remote. Moreover, the ripple effects of global land degradation directly impact food security, economic stability, and supply chains.

Excerpted: ‘The US Must Join the Global Fight Against Desertification to Prevent a Second Dust Bowl’. Courtesy: Commondreams.org