

# Tennessee Valley Authority and the New Deal

*Essential Questions: What were the goals for the Tennessee Valley Authority? What were the successes and failures of TVA?*

When Franklin Roosevelt was elected president in 1932, the nation was in the depths of the Great Depression. Nearly 25% of American workers were unemployed and people throughout the nation were struggling to survive. Roosevelt promised to implement a program of relief, recovery and reform called the New Deal. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was one of the agencies created during the first one hundred days of the New Deal.

During the 1920's George Norris, Senator from Nebraska, had tried to secure support for a multipurpose development in Muscle Shoals, Alabama where the government owned a large fertilizer plant. Roosevelt expanded the scope and size of Norris proposal to encompass the entire watershed of the Tennessee River. TVA was given a number of goals: prevent flooding, improve navigation, help farmers, provide cheap electricity, and form a strategic plan for the region.

The Tennessee Valley Region was one of the most depressed parts of the nation. Soil erosion had left much of the farmland ruined. Families scratched out a living on subsistence farms and lived in much the same way as their ancestors a hundred years earlier. Only one percent of farm families had indoor plumbing and only eight percent owned radios. TVA's solution to those problems was building dams to both control flooding and generate cheap electrical power. Unfortunately, building dams would displace thousands of the very families that TVA was charged with helping.

The first dam project TVA undertook was on the Clinch River in Anderson County. It was named Norris in honor of Senator George Norris who had worked so tirelessly for development in the Tennessee Valley region. Dam construction began in October of 1933, and was completed in March 1936 with a cost of \$36 million dollars. Some of those funds were used to buy the land that would be flooded when the dam was completed.

Residents in the Clinch River Valley, like residents in other areas where TVA would subsequently build dams, had varying points of view on the dam. Some residents viewed the dam project as beneficial because it would provide construction jobs in the present and hopefully manufacturing jobs in the future. Other residents argued that the dam would flood the best farmland leaving only marginal land to be farmed. Lastly, many residents did not want to leave the land their families had lived on for generations.

TVA employed a carrot and stick approach to land acquisition. Farmers were offered payment for their lands and the first to accept the offer often received help with moving expenses as well. TVA agents also appealed to residents' sense of patriotism and duty. They told residents how much the entire community would benefit from their sacrifice. One sticking point for many residents was that cemeteries containing the graves of loved ones would be flooded. To remove this objection, TVA offered to relocate community and family cemeteries in a manner that most residents considered respectful and dignified.

Residents who resisted TVA's carrot approach found themselves being ordered off their land under the doctrine of eminent domain. Eminent domain is the power of the government to take private land and convert it for public use as long as the owners receive just compensation. Many of the residents resistant to moving argued that the price being offered for their land was too low. Others simply felt that the right of individuals to own property should not be violated by their government. Some residents fought the sale of their land in court; others simply ignored the notices and went on with their lives. Ultimately, the courts upheld the use of eminent domain to force the sale of land for TVA projects. People who remained on their land after the sale was finalized were forcibly removed by local authorities.

By 1945, TVA had built twelve dams, created 14 million acres of floodwater storage, improved navigation from Knoxville to Paducah, Kentucky and was generating electric power for 668, 752 households. In Oak Ridge, TVA generated power had helped to enrich the uranium used in the atomic bomb. TVA had also displaced thousands of people and dismantled entire communities. While many of the displaced people came to see the economic benefits that TVA brought to the region, including the unexpected benefit of tourism, that did not stop them from feeling a profound sense of loss for the communities that disappeared.

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Pretend you're someone living in the Tennessee Valley. Use the text to list 2-3 pros and cons of TVA building projects. Things to keep in mind: People, Landscape, Economy, Energy, Etc.

Pros	Cons