Web: 3/17/11

USDA Forest Service
Cherokee National Forest

Celebrating a Century of Conservation: The Weeks Act Turns 100

The Weeks Act was the single most important law in the creation of the national forests of the eastern United States. The history of its origins, passage, and consequences is one of America's greatest environmental success stories.

Attached is an overview and four-part history of the 1911 Weeks Act:

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Overview

March 1, 2011 marked the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Weeks Act, which authorized the federal government to purchase forest lands in the eastern United States. Under the Weeks Act, some 20 million acres of farmed-out, cut-over land were purchased from willing sellers in 26 states. These "purchase units" became 52 national forests, including the Cherokee National Forest in east Tennessee.

The Weeks Act was the single most important law in the creation of national forests in the eastern United States. The history of its origins, passage and consequences is one of America's greatest environmental success stories. The law began a century of conservation—restoring forests, protecting clean water and reducing catastrophic wildfires.

Many people take for granted the rugged mountains, rushing streams and tree-covered slopes of the Cherokee National Forest. Today it seems as if these resources have always been here for people to use and enjoy. However, 100 years ago, what is today the Cherokee National Forest was land nobody wanted. It was cut-over, farmed out, burned up and over-grazed. With the passage of the Weeks Act in 1911, the federal government was given the authority to purchase private land from willing sellers. The USDA Forest Service took on the challenging task of restoring those lands. That task continues today.

Natural resource specialists, workers and technicians continue to protect and enhance the many resources we use and enjoy today. Forest Service managers strive to strike a balance between protecting and restoring the land, and meeting the needs and demands of people. Through decades of planning and proper management, the Cherokee National Forest and the other national forests throughout the eastern U.S. have become the lands of many sustainable uses. They provide clean water, productive forests, and diverse recreation opportunities.

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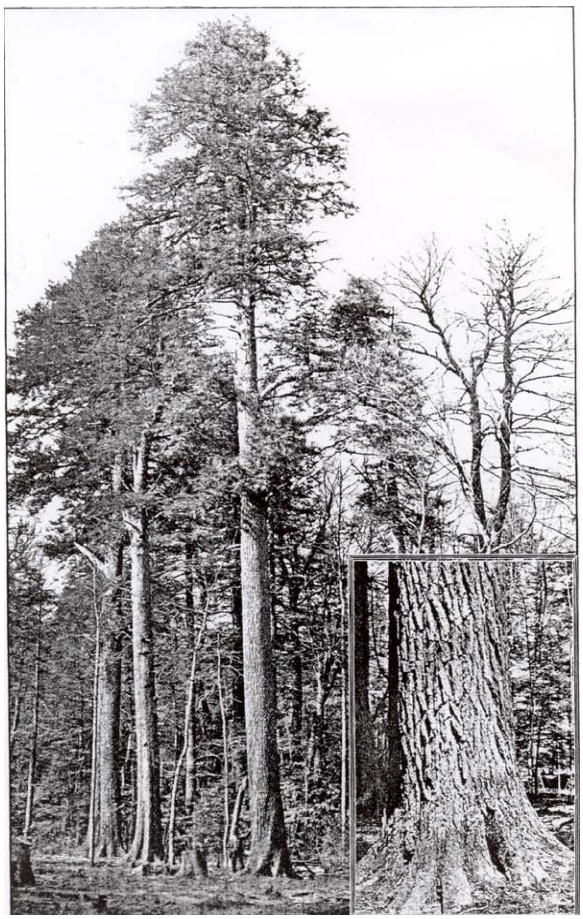
Origins of the Weeks Act, 1890-1900

1891—Congress passes Forest Reserves Act, allowing President to set aside federal land; President Harrison reserves 15 million acres in the West
1892—Gifford Pinchot goes to Biltmore (NC) and begins studying Appalachian forests; Charles S. Sargent publishes first call to establish an Appalachian forest reserve
1894—NC Press Association petitions Congress to establish an Appalachian forest reserve
1897—President Cleveland sets aside 21 million acres of forest land in the West
1898—Gifford Pinchot becomes chief of USDA Division of Forestry

The Weeks Act was the product of almost 20 years of forestry research. In 1892, a young forester named Gifford Pinchot was hired to manage and restore some 7,000 acres of land near Asheville, N.C. The land belonged to a wealthy New Yorker, George W. Vanderbilt, who was building an estate called Biltmore. Pinchot, himself the son of a wealthy Pennsylvania timber family, had studied forestry in France, but found little demand for his expertise in the U.S. Biltmore gave Pinchot a chance to demonstrate the potential of scientific forestry in the US. Pinchot and his successors at Biltmore founded the first forestry school in the U.S. there, which became known as the Cradle of Forestry.

Pinchot's study of North Carolina forests, published in 1897, documented some of the last old-growth hardwood before commercial logging spread across the Appalachians. His co-author, William W. Ashe, called for the protection of these forests from fire and livestock.



Outside North Carolina, the preservation of America's forest resources was becoming a national issue. In 1891, Congress passed the Forest Reserves Act, authorizing the president to remove forested federal land from the public domain. In 1896, Pinchot and his friend, the famous writer and wilderness advocate John Muir, traveled throughout the West with the National Forest Commission, studying potential areas for preservation. In 1897, President Grover Cleveland reserved 21 million acres of forest land. His successor, President William McKinley, took no action to manage the lands, but appointed Pinchot to lead the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Division of Forestry. Without an executive mandate or statutory power to manage the land, however, Pinchot had little real authority. Nevertheless, Pinchot continued his crusade and in 1899 convinced the governor of New York, Theodore Roosevelt, to join the cause of forest conservation. After Roosevelt became president in 1901, he and Pinchot continued their campaign.

***Left: North Carolina Old Growth, early 1890s**--Hemlock photo from Pinchot and Ashe's report. Note the human figure on the left side of the tree for scale.*

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Passage of the Weeks Act, 1900-1911

1899—Appalachian National Park Association formed in Asheville, N.C.
1900—Congress funds investigation into creating Appalachian forest reserve
1901—NC, SC, GA, TN, VA and AL pass state laws authorizing federal land purchase
1902—Report on Appalachian forests describes threats of fires and deforestation
1903—Appalachian National Park Association changes name to Appalachian Forest Reserve Association
1905—Appalachian Forest Reserve Association disbands after American Forestry Association takes up their cause
1907—Severe flooding on the Monongahela and Ohio Rivers traced to cut-over conditions of watersheds in Pennsylvania and West Virginia
1910—Catastrophic summer forest fires in Idaho and Montana

Pinchot, Roosevelt, Muir and other conservationists were opposed by politicians who made their money in logging and mining. After a decade of forestry research, it took another decade of political struggle in Congress before an Appalachian forest reserve became a reality.

In 1899, Dr. Chase P. Ambler of Asheville, N.C., organized the Appalachian National Park Association. In 1900, the Association convinced Congress to fund an investigation of forest conditions in the Appalachians. Pinchot's Division of Forestry and the U.S. Geological Survey conducted the survey. In 1902, they published their findings and declared that the forests of the South were being destroyed by logging, fire and hillside farming. But federal land reserves were opposed not only by western mining interests, represented by senators such as Montana's William A. Clark and Idaho's Welburn Heyburn, but also by fiscal conservatives such as Congressman Joseph "Uncle Joe" Cannon of Illinois, who promised "not a cent for scenery."

Above: *Sawmill waste and logging slash shown in the 1902 report. While Congress debated, timber companies were busy cashing in on the old growth forests of the Appalachians.*

Between 1901 and 1910, almost 50 bills were introduced in Congress proposing a forest reserve in the Appalachians. They all failed. The first objection, based on states' rights, was overcome by six southern state legislatures passing laws authorizing the federal government to purchase land. The second objection, that the U.S. constitution did not authorize the federal government to purchase land, was overcome by reference to the constitution's "commerce clause," which authorized the federal government to regulate trade and navigation. Advocates of the southern forest reserves therefore focused on how deforestation caused runoff, flooding and the obstruction of navigable streams.

As they cut their way through the profitable old growth of Appalachia, large timber companies began to see the benefits of a federal land buyout. In 1905, the Appalachian Forest Reserve Association turned over its cause to an unlikely ally, a trade association made up of big timber interests known as the American Forestry Association. Cut-over land was

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worth little to companies accustomed to the profits of extraction without the costs of cultivation. After the saw logs were stripped off, parcels bought up for the timber turned into tax liabilities. The federal government could buy up lands that nobody else wanted.

In 1907, catastrophic flooding on the Monongahela and Ohio Rivers was traced directly to the cut-over condition of the upstream watersheds in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Three years later, wildfires devastated Idaho and Montana, killing more than 100 firefighters and burning several towns. Forest reserve advocates used these events to convince Congress of the need for forest restoration to regulate runoff and for an organization that could deal with wildland fire. Finally, on Feb. 5, 1911, Congress passed a bill sponsored by Congressman John Weeks (R-MA), authorizing the federal government to buy "forested, cut over or denuded lands within the watersheds of navigable streams." The bill also appropriated 11 million dollars for the purpose. On March 1, President William H. Taft signed the bill into law.

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The Legacy of the Weeks Act, 1911-2011

1912—Federal government buys White Top Purchase Unit (319,625 acres in TN and VA) and Cherokee Purchase Unit (222,058 acres in TN)
1920—July 24, Cherokee National Forest established in TN, NC, and VA
1924—Clarke-McNary Act expands Weeks Act purchase authority beyond headwaters of navigable streams and adds lumber production and watershed protection as goals
1936—July 19, Cherokee National Forest boundaries adjusted to their current locations
1933 to 1942—Civilian Conservation Corps plants trees, builds campgrounds and fights fires
1965—Land and Water Conservation Fund created to help purchase lands under the Weeks Act
1976—National Forest Reserve Commission duties assigned to Secretary of Agriculture

The Weeks Act created a board called the National Forest Reservation Commission, which consisted of the secretaries of war, interior and agriculture, as well as two senators and two congressmen. The Commission was responsible for approving land purchases under the Weeks Act, including prices and boundaries. Within a month of the president's signing the Weeks Act, the USDA Forest Service had a list of proposed purchases ready for the Commission.

Most of the lands that now comprise the south districts of the Cherokee National Forest were purchased in large tracts from big logging companies such as Tennessee Timber Company and its subsidiaries (1911-1912), Tennga Lumber Company (1912-1918) and Conasauga Lumber Company (1918- 30s.) Most of the north districts of the Cherokee, which were originally organized as the Unaka National Forest, were purchased from firms such as the Douglas Land Company and the Whiting Lumber Company (1912).

These lands were devastated, cut over or farmed out. In some cases the sellers reserved timber cutting rights on acreages that remained uncut. In the century that followed, the men and women of the USDA Forest Service restored these lands to the healthy forest ecosystems of today.

The Cherokee National Forest was established in 1920, along with several other national forests, including what is now the Nantahala in North Carolina. In 1923, the National Forest Reservation Commission recommended extending the authority of the Weeks Act to cover land purchases aimed at sustainable timber production. In 1924, Congress enacted this recommendation as the Clarke-McNary Act, which expanded federal-state cooperation in wildfire control and provided for seeding and planting in the national forests.

Fire control was the USDA Forest Service's first priority on the new forests. Fire lookout towers and trails were built and "forest guards" were hired at a salary of $50 a month. Because the Weeks Act provided matching federal funding for state wildfire management spending, state divisions of forestry also upgraded their fire control organizations.

From 1933 to 1942, the USDA Forest Service objective of restoring watersheds first made significant progress with the hard work of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC.) The purpose of the CCC was to create jobs for unemployed urban men by putting them to work in the woods. The national forests of the South had plenty of work to be done. There were fires to fight and roads, trails, telephone lines, and campgrounds to build. The CCC also did extensive stand improvement for the Forest Service, cutting away diseased and less valuable trees.

Above: *CCC workers planting trees.*

After the Great Depression, logging returned to the national forests of the Appalachians with the rising demand for wood caused by the Second World War. The war years and the economic boom of the 1950s kept logging profitable and also resulted in the growth of coal mining. Following World War II, the National Forest Reserves Commission made few land purchases, but acquired tracts from other agencies, especially the Tennessee Valley Authority.

But lumber was not the only thing Americans wanted from their national forests in the 1950s. With more money in their pockets and cars in their garages, Americans wanted outdoor recreation as well. Recreational visits to national forests soared in the postwar years. The rising importance of recreational uses of public lands was recognized by Congress in 1965, when it created the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to pay for lands with recreational values. For the next decade, the LWCF was the largest source of funding for Weeks Act land acquisitions.

Today the Cherokee National Forest (forest) provides clean water for east Tennessee and outdoor recreation opportunities to more than two million visitors every year. The Cherokee continues the tradition of fire management by hosting the Tennessee Interagency Coordination Center, which dispatches wildland firefighting resources nationwide. The forest also hosts the Cherokee Hotshots, an elite wildland firefighting crew.

Celebrating 100 Years of Conservation

Above: *A train loaded with logs traversing the top of Bald River Falls in the 1920s (left) contrasts with the natural character of the site today (right.) The photos graphically depict the shift in land use from destructive old-growth logging to sustainable forestry, watershed protection and ecological restoration. This change, effected by a century of hard work by the USDA Forest Service, would not have been possible without the Weeks Act.*

The Weeks Act Legacy by the Numbers

Nationwide

132 Congressionally designated wilderness areas
34 National Wild and Scenic Rivers
9 National Recreation Areas
16 National Game Refuges and Wildlife Preserves
27,000 miles of hiking trails (including 848 miles of the Appalachian Trail)
More than 3,700 developed recreation sites
More than 53 million recreation visits each year
2.9 million acres planted and seeded
1 in 5 Americans gets clean water from forest lands acquired under the Weeks Act

In 2011, the USDA Forest Service will celebrate a century of conservation by recognizing achievements in wildland fire management, forest restoration and watershed protection at various events throughout the East. For more information about the centennial of the Weeks Act, please visit http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/weeksact.

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