For four decades industry asked the Forest Service to limit timber sales because of a flood of cheap timber already on the market. But as private timber supplies dried up, industry changed its tune.

When Gifford Pinchot walked out of his office for the last time as Chief of the Forest Service in 1910, he left a situation far different than the one he found after taking over the fledgling Department of Forestry 11 years earlier.

The timber industry was changing rapidly as lumbermen adjusted to Pinchot’s Forest Service. And there’s no doubt it was Pinchot’s agency from top to bottom.

He had been the one to push the agency from obscurity to prominence in the debate over forest use. He had fought to transfer the reserves from the Department of Interior into the Department of Agriculture. He had helped boost reserves from 43 million acres to over 194 million. And he was beginning to win the fight to have modern forestry practices become the norm in America’s logging camps.

However, nobody could know if Pinchot’s successes would be preserved in coming decades, or if they would wither away inside an agency that might soon be forgotten.

Pinchot had been fired because of his caustic attacks on Richard Ballinger, President William Taft’s appointee to Interior Secretary. Ballinger, a one-time mayor of Seattle, had taken over a million acres out of reserve and reversed several of Pinchot’s hard-fought gains. Ballinger’s move to transfer coal lands in Alaska to the Morgan-Guggenheim syndicate so enraged Pinchot that he began a public tirade against both Taft and his appointee. In the end, Taft had no choice but to fire Pinchot.

It would have been easy for Pinchot to just walk away, but that wasn’t his style. Pinchot still carried a big stick on Capitol Hill and he began a campaign to startle Americans into stiffer timber harvesting regulations on both public and private land.

At the root of Pinchot’s campaign was his forecast that a “timber famine” would strike the U.S. unless modern forestry was adopted. He found an eager accomplice in his old friend, former President Theodore Roosevelt. In a 1910 speech, Roosevelt said, “The United States has already crossed the verge of a timber famine so severe that its blighting effects will be felt in every household in the land.”

It wasn’t a new theme. Thirty years earlier Interior Secretary Carl Schurz had warned that another 25 years of logging as it was then would leave the U.S. “as completely stripped of her forest as Asia Minor today.”

Of course the timber famine never happened. Technology was changing, stabilizing demand on the nation’s forests. Railroads converted from wood fuel to coal. Preservatives caused crossties to last longer. Also, concrete and steel were becoming major building materials, lessening the demand for construction lumber.
The Forest Service, states, and industry increasingly cooperated in fighting fires after the 1911 Weeks Act provided matching funds to states that established fire protection systems. The photo of a burned-over area in one of the 1910 Idaho fires is from the Forest History Society archives.

Age of Cooperation

The nation was changing also. Following 1910, the emphasis on production and economic growth that dominated the preceding decades began to recede. The country was backing away from the regulatory posture of the Progressive Era and its animosity toward big business. There was a growing emphasis on cooperation between public and private sectors.

Now on the outside and unrestrained by decorum, Pinchot used his congressional influence to have his close friend Henry Graves appointed as the second Chief of the Forest Service. Ballinger was pressured into resignation and replaced by Walter Fisher, a Pinchot friend and supporter. Fisher abruptly ended the Alaska coal deal and Taft hesitated to open any more public land or reverse Pinchot policies.

The bloody political battle had proven to Taft that Pinchot still had a stable of powerful friends.

Through the remainder of the decade Graves cautiously steered the Forest Service past occasional hostility from Congress and frequent coolness from Taft and Woodrow Wilson. Like Pinchot, Graves demanded efficiency in those beneath him. But unlike Pinchot, Graves was no self-righteous crusader, nor did he assume evil intent in those who disagreed with him.

Graves was a peacemaker, gradually easing the tension between the Forest Service and executive branch. It wasn’t easy, for Pinchot was relentless in his attacks on the Department of Interior and forcefully lobbied for national parks to be transferred to the Forest Service, eventually losing the battle in 1916. Pinchot’s argument remained that resources should be managed for production rather than locked up for recreation or scenic preservation.

Like Pinchot, Graves favored federal regulation of cutting practices on private as well as public lands. He believed strongly the forests were to be used, not preserved. But he insisted they be used wisely.

Graves’ aims were given a tremendous boost by passage of the Weeks Act in 1911. The act provided matching funds to any state that set up an acceptable system of fire protection for forested watersheds and navigable streams. But more importantly, it allowed federal acquisition of forestland in the eastern U.S. This was a major step for the Forest Service, whose previous influence in the East had been indirect and limited. With few exceptions, most of the public domain in the East had been disposed of before 1911. Since 1911, 20.5 million acres have been acquired under the authority of the Weeks Act, with about 98 percent in states east of the hundredth meridian. By encouraging states to form forestry departments, the act marked the beginning of increased cooperation among the Forest Service, states, and industry to fight fires.

At that time, about 10 million acres burned every year. In 1910, a single fire burned over three million acres in Idaho and Montana. In the South, many fires were set by poor whites to retaliate against landowners for some wrong against them, real or perceived. Between 1915 and 1925, it’s estimated about one-third of the South’s pine forests burned.

Graves brought former Pinchot assistant William Greeley back to Washington as Assistant Chief in 1911 with the job of developing better cooperation between the Forest Service and state agencies in regard to the Weeks Act. Although successful, Greeley’s stay was a short one, as he left several years later for the war in Europe as part of the American Expeditionary Force. To satisfy the allied armies’ thirst for wood, the 10th Engineering Regiment was formed of experienced lumbermen and foresters, many of them from the Forest Service. The regiment operated some 90 sawmills, produced about 300 million board feet (MMBF) of lumber, made three million poles, and more than 300,000 cords of firewood.

Using experience gained in the war, many of the regiment’s members returned to the U.S. for jobs in the Forest Service. These men were certainly needed.

Henry Graves resigned as Chief of the Forest Service in 1920 to eventually be named Dean of the Yale School of Forestry, which Pinchot had founded. Greeley became the new Forest Service Chief.

Greeley’s time in office would be filled with renewed battles, first for control of the forest reserves themselves, then for the cooperation of the nation’s lumbermen.

Warren Harding was elected President in 1920 on his pledge to return the country to “normalcy.”

By Harding’s definition, that meant an end to increased regulations on industry and a retreat from the conservation stance of his predecessors. Harding’s appointment of notorious anti-conservationist Albert Fall to Secretary of Interior had the Forest Service howling.
Fall quickly set out to gather all federal lands back within his department as they had been prior to 1905. It had taken Pinchot years to convince Congress that national forests could be better managed under the Department of Agriculture. Now, 15 years later, Greeley was facing the same battle, only to keep the national forests from being taken away.

Harding and Fall were surprised by the fierce opposition in the forestry community. Pinchot, Graves, and Agriculture Secretary Henry Wallace rallied behind Greeley, as did the American Forestry Association and the Society of American Foresters. In the face of such opposition, Harding retreated from Fall’s plan, which was eventually dropped when Fall resigned in the early days of the Teapot Dome scandal.

The transfer bill had already been drafted, but Harding couldn’t muster the political muscle to sign it. It was a great victory for Greeley’s Forest Service, but greater battles lay ahead.

After the war the demand for timber plummeted. The national price for lumber fell 50 percent from 1920 to 1921. The shakeout forced dozens of mills to close, but by 1923 production was high again, although prices remained low.

**Defining the Debate**

While lumbermen were trying to cope with low prices, they also had to deal with chronic overproduction and worries of timber depletion. Studies by both the Forest Service and a congressional committee showed timber continued to be cut more rapidly than it was replaced between 1910 and 1920. The congressional study, known as the Capper Report, estimated that in 1920 the U.S. had only 40 percent as much standing timber as in 1800. In a single year the consumption of wood amounted to 26 billion cubic feet, while growth totaled only six billion.

The Capper Report revealed that more than one-quarter of the nation’s cut-over land (about 81 million acres) was left barren, without farms, people, or trees. Private industry lands in Oregon clear-cut in the 1920s and 1930s more often than not went unplanted. Because new growth faced competition from non-commercial species, these second-growth forests today hold only 65 percent of the timber they could have if they had been replanted, according to Forest Service economists.

But such long-range planning was rare in the 1920s, despite the urging of Forest Service leaders. Logging continued to cling to its nomadic ways, with lumbermen roving from one valley to the next. For that reason and others, companies had trouble maintaining a steady workforce. Logging foremen joked they had three crews: one coming, one going, and one working.

Despite labor problems, harvest levels continued to climb in the 1920s. Timber growth was only half the rate of harvest. As gas-powered tractors and logging trucks made their way into the woods, timber depletion increased.

To meet the crisis, former chiefs Pinchot and Graves urged Congress to strictly regulate cutting on private lands. Graves, typically, was more restrained than Pinchot for he was willing to accept state control within federal guidelines. Others, fearing aggressive regulations would create an adversarial relationship between government and industry, supported the cooperative policies advocated by Greeley. Greeley said shortly after taking office the “Forest Service has no delusion that it is divinely commissioned to tell lumbermen how to run their business.”

This emotional divide became the topic of the day in forestry circles, splitting the profession.

After prolonged controversy between the two camps, Greeley’s philosophy of education and cooperation prevailed with the passage of the Clarke-McNary Act of 1924. The bill expanded the federal-state-industry program for cooperative fire protection and gave $2.5 million to finance it. It also authorized a federal-state system of nurseries to provide for reforestation, a study of forest taxation and its effects, and a forestry extension program.

But most important, the Clarke-McNary Act authorized federal land acquisition in the drainages of all navigable streams. This cleared the way for expansion of national forests east of the Mississippi River. Nowhere did the act mention regulation of private forests.

Greeley’s emphasis on cooperation with the lumber industry to change logging practices began to bear fruit in the late ’20s. In Arkansas, Edward Crossett took up scientific forestry to guarantee a timber harvest year after year. George Long began carefully grooming 900,000 acres in the Northwest under the direction of Frederick Weyerhaeuser.

In 1928, Greeley resigned to become secretary-manager of the West Coast Lumbermen’s Association. He was replaced by Robert Young. A year after Young took charge the Depression hit the timber industry hard, particularly the Lake States and South. Production dropped to the lowest level since the 1870s and many companies dropped out. Thousands of acres of cut-over land became tax delinquent and fell back to public ownership. In Washington, the state’s cut dropped from 7 billion board feet (BF) in 1929 to just over 2 billion BF in 1932. In Mississippi, the cut dropped from 2.6 billion BF to just 530MMBF, the lowest figure since 1890. On the national forests harvests dropped from 1.4 billion BF in 1929 to 474MMBF in 1932.

The situation was a golden opportunity for President Franklin Roosevelt to push his pro-forestry agenda. Regulation ballooned in the Depression years with a host of federal programs affecting the nation’s forests directly and the timber industry indirectly.

With Executive Order 6101 Roosevelt brought the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) into existence. Many of these young men were sent to work planting trees under Forest Service direction.

Not surprisingly, during the CCC years forest fire losses fell to the lowest level since records were kept. The CCC built the Ponderosa Way, a 600-mile road in northern California. It planted more than 2 million acres and cleared the undergrowth from 4 million
more. In 1936 it planted more than 500 million seedlings on national forest lands alone. In the Tennessee Valley, the Forest Service directed over 30 CCC camps that planted 44 million trees.

In July 1934 Roosevelt announced the government would spend $75 million to plant a "shelterbelt" of trees across the Great Plains from Texas to Canada. The swathe of trees would be 100 miles wide and cover 20 million acres. It would take 10 years to complete and cost $75 million. New Chief Ferdinand Silcox actively supported the idea, although H. H. Chapman, President of the Society of American Foresters, warned the rewards were not worth the costs. Although the project was not funded by Congress, Silcox proceeded with the "shelterbelt" between 1935 and 1942, eventually planting some 220 million trees at a cost of $14 million.

During Roosevelt's administration the national forest system was expanded greatly. In Texas 11 timber companies sold 600,000 acres of cut-over land for $4.65 an acre. The land became four new national forests. In Illinois, the Shawnee National Forest was formed with 211,000 acres bought at $6.43 per acre. In all, Roosevelt formed 23 new national forests, mostly in the South and East, totalling 10 million acres.

Opening the Forests

The arrival of World War II dramatically changed the forest industry, as the war effort consumed more tons of wood than steel. A year before Pearl Harbor, industry was already pumping out 36 billion BF. That figure jumped dramatically over the next few years as the timber giants logged much of their remaining land to supply a wood-hungry military.

When the war ended, many of these companies found themselves with severely depleted timber holdings. Immediately after the war, the Forest Service found the nation's timber supply had declined some 43 percent in the previous generation. Saw timber was being cut one and a half times faster than it was growing, largely because of war demands. But now it was the big timber giants who worried about "timber famine."

Suddenly, more timber sales were a good idea.

For the first 40 years, management of the national forests had been primarily custodial—planting trees and protecting them from fire. There were still huge supplies of timber available on both private and public lands, keeping timber prices in the basement and minimizing demand for public timber.

For decades industry had pressured the Forest Service to curtail timber sales to keep prices from going even lower. The Forest Service willingly went along with the policy.

Between 1907 and 1911 the Forest Service refused to sell timber except when local communities relied solely on the national forest for survival. In 1913, only .5 percent of the nation's lumber came from national forests. Even after the demands of WWI, public land provided only 3 percent of the nation's timber in 1919.

This policy was actively supported by industry. The trade journal West Coast Lumberman repeatedly urged the Forest Service to cut its sales even further. R. L. McCormick, secretary of Weyerhaeuser Timber Co., wrote in favor of further sales cutbacks in the 1920s, saying it was the "best business policy for their management." An editorial in Portland's newspaper The Oregonian said clearly, "More sales will depress the price of lumber."

In an effort to prop up the ailing lumber industry in the early days of the Depression, President Herbert Hoover asked for a restriction on "leasing of the national forests for wood production" to ease overproduction and boost lumber prices. In response, the Forest Service prohibited sales of timber "during the present economic situation" of timber valued at over $500.

The order listed three exceptions: 1) to supply mills dependent upon national forests, 2) to supply domestic paper mills, and 3) to salvage damaged timber. Frederick Weyerhaeuser publicly praised the President for "his wisdom and courage and for proper and intelligent cooperation with business."

In short, up to WWII the guiding principles of the Forest Service concerning management of the national forests had not been tested. The agency preached active management to maximize use, but actual management activities to that point had been small.

But WWII changed all that.

Between 1939 and 1945 the harvest from national forests doubled and continued to rise thereafter as Americans went on a home building frenzy. In 1952 the Forest Service harvest reached 6.4 billion BF, 13 percent of the U.S. timber supply. A decade later it stood at 10.7 billion BF, 22 percent of the U.S. supply.

By the late '50s the Forest Service was beginning to shift timber harvesting into high gear as industry placed greater and greater demands upon it. However, the Forest Service did not anticipate the strong opposition among recreationists—an activity the agency still considered incidental. By 1950 recreational visits to national forests had climbed to 27.4 million, more than five times the total of 25 years earlier. By 1960 the figure had nearly tripled again, to 70 million visits.

The argument over forest use was changing from the regulatory approaches of the early 1900s and economic debates of the '30s. As 1960 approached, intangible terms such as scenic beauty, quality of life, and ecological diversity were becoming fulcrums of the argument. Like so much else in America, the debate on forest use would polarize on these terms over the next 20 years.