

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Weeks Act: A Watershed in Forest History

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If someone proposed today that the U.S. government purchase, reserve, and restore 20 million acres of forestland in the eastern United States, there would likely be a hard battle waged from many corners. Even without the fiscal constraints the country is currently facing, the philosophical arguments would be front and center. And so it was 100 years ago, when it had taken more than 10 years to pass legislation what would become known as the Weeks Act of 1911.

Signed into law by President William Howard Taft, the Weeks Act allowed the purchase of lands that would become the national forests east of the Mississippi. It also provided the first groundwork for cooperative fire control between the federal and state governments and local interests. It can be argued that no other law has been more important for the forests in the eastern United States.

Although the eventual results of the Weeks Act are significant by almost any measure, from forest restoration and wildlife habitat to recreation and economic opportunities, its success was not a given, not by any means. The arguments against the effort might be familiar. Fiscal conservatives protested something they considered a frivolity, declaring “not one cent for scenery.” Western states feared losing funding to their eastern counterparts. Constitutional authority to make the purchases was questioned. States’ rights were invoked, and some asserted that the private landowner could manage the lands better than the government.

The story is an important one, not only to document the great benefits we enjoy today because of the Weeks Act, but also because it is an example of environmental policy under conditions of uncertainty. For both these reasons, the Forest History Society was proud during the past two years to engage in a variety of programs to recognize the 100th anniversary of the Weeks Act, culminating with this special issue of *Forest History Today*.

Our efforts began in 2010 with the development of special web pages for the Weeks Act on the FHS website, found at www.weeksact.org. The staff wrote an original historical overview essay, and scanned and posted documents relevant to the Weeks Act, what led up to it, and what followed. Journalists and many others have made use of this resource. The FHS staff provided



more traditional assistance: historian Jamie Lewis published two op-ed articles and participated in radio interviews, he and I provided background information for many newspaper and newsletter articles, and librarian Cheryl Oakes and technical archivist Eben Lehman provided research assistance to numerous people organizing their own Weeks Act celebrations.

We were fortunate to have Robert G. Healy, professor emeritus at Duke University, on the FHS Board of Directors during this time. He was the coauthor with Bill Shands of the 1977 book *The Lands Nobody Wanted*, which provided a comprehensive report on the 50 national forests east of the Rocky Mountains created under the law.

FHS hosted Healy’s Weeks Act centennial blog series on its award-winning blog “Peeling Back the Bark” (www.peelingbackthebark.org). He was also selected to present the Lynn W. Day Distinguished Lectureship, hosted by the Forest History Society with the Duke University Nicholas School of the Environment and the university’s Department of History. The lecture, entitled “Policymaking under Conditions of Uncertainty: The Weeks Act and the Eastern National Forests,” is now available online at www.foresthistory.org/Events/lecture.html.

The FHS staff was also pleased to collaborate with the U.S. Forest Service and a variety of groups on projects to commemorate the Weeks Act centennial. Jamie Lewis and I spoke on the topic to audiences in New Hampshire, North Carolina, and South Carolina; FHS assisted Plymouth State University in New Hampshire with special projects; and we supported efforts by the Pinchot Institute for Conservation and others to organize a Weeks Act symposium held at Yale University in June. Many of the presentations made at the symposium were adapted for this special issue.

All those efforts and events are an excellent example of the kind of multimedia effort that can be orchestrated to help people understand how forest history has and continues to affect their lives. We will continue to monitor how the discussions of the past year might lead to new initiatives. Perhaps 100 years hence, historians will look back at our time and discern equally significant events in American conservation. □