

U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell reminds us that the tough political climate faced by today's conservationists is not without precedent. Conservationists of a century ago also confronted a Congress unwilling to support federal intervention on behalf of forestlands; the fight for the Weeks Act then provides lessons for conservationists today.

THE WEEKS ACT

A STORY OF PERSEVERANCE

The Weeks Act of 1911 was a key piece of legislation for the future of forestry in the United States. It gave the U.S. secretary of Agriculture the authority to acquire lands “necessary to the regulation of the flow of navigable streams or for the production of timber” and to add them to the National Forest

System. Through the Weeks authority, the stage was set for a system of national forests in the East.

The Weeks Act also strengthened authority for the Forest Service’s State and Private Forestry programs. It laid the groundwork for cooperative forestry by authorizing compacts “for the purpose of conserving the forests and the water supply of the States.” In addition, it authorized the secretary of Agriculture to work with the states to establish “a system of fire protection on any private or State forest lands,” within broad limits (USDA Forest Service 1993, 20).

But these achievements lie in the past. For fiscal year 2012, proposed budget cuts, if enacted by Congress, will constrain new federal land acquisitions and cooperative programs for both forestry and wildland fire management. Complicating matters, there also appears to be strong resistance to climate change science; for example, the National Academy of Sciences, in response to a specific request from Congress, called for action to address climate change (National Research Council 2011), but skepticism has long been entrenched in some circles (McCright and Dunlap 2003).

Given this context, what relevance does the Weeks Act still have today?

Actually, quite a bit. From a public policy perspective, the context at the turn of the twentieth century was similar in some ways to the situation today. Is there a lesson to be learned?

THE GAY NINETIES

People often think of the turn of the twentieth century as a golden age of conservation, when great visionaries led the way—people like Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and John Muir. The early conservation movement did have some spectacular successes, such as setting aside national forests and national monuments and passing key legislation, including the Antiquities Act of 1906 and the Weeks Act of 1911.

But those successes came against long odds. The prevailing wisdom at the time had little to do with conservation. In his memoir, Gifford Pinchot described what he and other early conservationists were up against:

When the Gay Nineties began, the common word for our forests was “inexhaustible.” To waste timber was a virtue and not a crime.... What few friends the forest had were spoken of, when they were spoken of at all, as...more or less touched in the head. What talk there was about forest protection was no more to the average American than the buzzing of a mosquito, and just about as irritating (Pinchot 1947, 27).

The average American that Pinchot describes elected like-minded people to Congress, including many who bitterly opposed federal spending for forest protection. Congressional opponents of such spending said it was unconstitutional, and also opposed

BY TOM TIDWELL



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Conservationists used photos like this of a cutover pine forest in Georgia (taken in 1903) to help gather support for federal action.

the president's power to create national forests from the public domain. Congress passed legislation in 1907 stripping the president of his authority to designate a national forest in six western states. Leading Forest Service opponents included Senators William Clark (D-MT), Charles Fulton (R-OR), and Weldon Heyburn (R-ID); Heyburn actually proclaimed his hatred of the very idea of a national forest and vowed to kill the Forest Service itself (Egan 2009). These opponents were joined by fiscal conservatives led by the most powerful voice in the House, that of Speaker Joe Cannon (R-IL), who famously said, "Not one cent for scenery!"

The last thing these congressional leaders wanted was to expand the national forests into the East. In 1901, when the first bill was introduced to authorize funding for a federal forest reserve in the Appalachians, it went down to defeat. In the decade that followed, Congress rejected more than 40 bills calling for the establishment of national forests in the East. After Roosevelt left office in 1909, leaders in Congress planned to kill the entire agency by picking away at funding for the Forest Service, which was already so underfunded that a ranger in 1905 made the same salary as the agency's clerk-typist had made in 1886 (Steen 1976).

It was a terrible context for sound forest policy, certainly different from today, but still in some ways familiar. For political reasons, people at the time were questioning the science behind forestry and conservation. They were assailing the constitutionality of the federal role in conservation. And they were looking for ways to reduce federal funding for conservation.

TRANSFORMATIONAL EVENTS

So what changed? Despite this terrible context for public policy, how did conservation prevail?

It prevailed by the gravity of certain incontrovertible events—graphic events that caught the nation's eye, that seized the public's imagination, that gave conservationists the ammunition they needed to find partners and build support.

First came a series of events that were rooted in the forestry ethic of the day—or the lack of it. Theodore Roosevelt had decried the lumbermen who "skin and exhaust the land instead of using it so as to increase its usefulness" (Roosevelt 1907). Gifford Pinchot put it this way: "The lumbermen, whose industry was then the third greatest in this country, regarded forest devastation as normal and second growth as a delusion of fools" (Pinchot 1947, 27). Pinchot knew what he was talking about; his wealthy father was a scion of those same lumbermen (Miller 2001).

What was going on then is barely imaginable today. America's forest estate is broadly stable today—for now—and in some places it is even expanding (Smith et al. 2004). Clearcuts have become so exceptional and invisible that when people pass one on the road, they might even wonder what is going on.

But for Pinchot and his contemporaries, clearcuts were everywhere, and they stretched across entire landscapes. Over the last four centuries, what is now the United States has lost about a quarter of its original forest cover; nearly two-thirds of that loss came in the second half of the nineteenth century, mainly due



Ohio River flooding in Harrisburg, Illinois, in February 1937. Similar scenes in the Ohio Valley at the turn of the twentieth century, partly resulting from upstream deforestation, caused a public outcry.

to forest clearing for timber and agriculture (Smith et al. 2004). By the turn of the twentieth century, everywhere Americans looked, especially in the East and Midwest but increasingly in the South and West, they saw huge areas of forest being leveled. The leftover slash would then burn in uncontrollable fires, decimating landscapes for decades to come. Some of those landscapes, such as Dolly Sods in West Virginia, have never fully recovered. Their soils are still too badly damaged.

Those damaged forest soils once absorbed huge quantities of rainfall and snowmelt and then would slowly release the water over time, recharging streams. Deforestation, however, led to watershed degradation, resulting in erosion and downstream siltation during some parts of the year and reduced streamflows during other parts of the year. Catastrophic floods caught the public eye. In 1889, more than 2,000 people died in a flood in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, when heavy rains on deforested slopes caused a dam to blow out. In 1907, heavy rains came again to the Ohio Valley. Stories of devastation and destruction in West Virginia and Pennsylvania filled the news; homes floated downriver, and Pittsburgh factory workers stood up to their knees in river mud.

Then came the legendary fires of 1910. That year huge fires burned across the country, but proved especially destructive in the Northern Rockies (Pyne 2001). The Forest Service fought the fires for weeks and had managed to contain them. But then came August and the “Big Blowup,” with hot dry winds that whipped the smoldering flames into the perfect firestorm, what witnesses described as a “hurricane.” In two days’ time, the gale-force winds blew fire across more than 3 million acres. Scores of firefighters died; entire towns were destroyed, entire landscapes devastated.

As far as the public was concerned, that was the last straw.

Pressure had already been building for Congress to finally do something about protecting forests and watersheds. Many eastern members of Congress were already on board; after the Big Blowup, many westerners were on board, too. Provisions for cooperative forestry and fire protection were cobbled together with authorizations for creating national forests in the East, and in 1911 the Weeks Act became law.

The rest, of course, is history. Over the next 40 years, 25 million acres of land that had been cut over, burned over, and farmed out became national forest lands. Today, there are 52 national forests east of the Mississippi, many of them still recovering, but all of them furnishing clean water to millions of Americans—and providing other benefits as well, such as erosion control, carbon sequestration, habitat for wildlife, and opportunities for outdoor recreation. Mixed landownerships in the East lend themselves to landscape-scale conservation, and today the Forest Service has collaborative authorities, through the Weeks Act and other measures, to work across boundaries for watershed protection—for the long-term health of the lands shared by all.

A LESSON FOR TODAY

So it was a series of events at the turn of the twentieth century that led to conservation success. Events are meaningless unless tied together in a meaningful way, but skilled interpreters were on the scene: Roosevelt, Pinchot, Muir, and others stood up to the privileged few. By creating bully pulpits of their own—by envisioning a better life for ordinary Americans—they prevailed in the name of conservation, of caring for the land and serving people.

The lesson for today is this: reversals might come, but conservationists should not lose hope. Although Roosevelt and Pinchot



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The aftermath of the Big Blowup of 1910 on the Coeur d'Alene National Forest near Wallace, Idaho. Images like this underscored the need for cooperative fire control and prevention, which was already in the 1909 draft version of the Weeks Act.

faced severe reversals, they persevered. It took ten years or more for the Weeks Act to come to fruition; nevertheless, once political momentum reached a tipping point, conservation prevailed.

Why? Because, as John Adams once said, facts are stubborn things. Denial and wishful thinking can obscure them for a time, but in the end events will bring the facts to light. Conservation is a powerful narrative, one that rests on fact and science. The Forest Service needs to continue to tell that story, reaching out to Americans of all ages, from all backgrounds, from every ethnic group, from every walk of life. If we can broaden the circle of conservation, then success, in the end, is assured. □

Tom Tidwell is chief of the USDA Forest Service, Washington, D.C. This paper is based on a presentation he gave on June 7, 2011, at the Weeks Act Symposium sponsored by the Pinchot Institute and the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

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