

Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot organized the American Forest Congress in 1905 in part to educate American businessmen about the promise of conservation and forestry in managing the nation's forest resources. For F. E. Weyerhaeuser, the meeting became a lesson in hardball politics when President Theodore Roosevelt accused him and his fellow lumbermen of "skinning" the land for their own profit. Roosevelt's political grandstanding ignored the fact that some progressive lumbermen already supported conservation and wished to work closely with government to overcome obstacles to implementing it industry-wide.

TIME, FIRE, & TAXES

**FREDERICK E. WEYERHAEUSER
AT THE AMERICAN FOREST CONGRESS**

When President Theodore Roosevelt delivered the opening address to the American Forest Congress of 1905, he strayed from his prepared text, stunning a particular segment of the audience which had been invited there at Roosevelt's behest. A conference attendee recalled

nearly thirty years later: "Roosevelt, barely recognizing the audience, almost immediately turned on the group of 100 or more well known lumbermen...shook his fist, his teeth gleamed, he called them skimmers of the soil, despoilers of the national heritage, and shouted many other insulting and characteristically Rooseveltian phrases."¹

The shocked guest was Frederick E. ("F. E.") Weyerhaeuser. The youngest son of Frederick Weyerhaeuser, the founder of the great timber company, F. E. recalled the incident twenty-seven years later in a letter to his own son, who had innocently asked about Roosevelt's conservation policies. Ironically, F. E. was not even supposed to be there. His father had been ill and was unable to address the congress as part of the "Lumber Industry and Forests" panel; Gifford Pinchot then asked F. E. to read a paper. He accepted, and at Pinchot's urging F. E. also persuaded "many prominent lumber manufacturers and timber owners" to accept invitations, which according to F. E. in his letter, Pinchot made

clear came from President Roosevelt. "Earnestly desiring to learn something about forestry," approximately one hundred lumbermen made the trip to Washington.

The night before the Congress started, Pinchot read Weyerhaeuser an outline of Roosevelt's speech that the forester had drafted. The young businessman found the remarks to be "moderate," with "a high degree of fairness." The next day, a startled Weyerhaeuser listened as Roosevelt thundered at Weyerhaeuser and his fellow lumbermen: "You all know, and especially those of you from the West, the individual whose idea of developing the country is to cut every stick of timber off of it and then leave a barren desert for the homemaker who comes in after him. That man is a curse and not a blessing to the country.... I am going to work with, and only with, the man who develops the country. I am against the land skinner every time."² Concluded Weyerhaeuser: "Roosevelt set back the cause of forestry fifteen years or more." Instead of learning about the president's conservation

BY JAMES G. LEWIS

measures and the economic value of “practical forestry,” the lumbermen “went home disgusted with Roosevelt.” For his troubles, Weyerhaeuser received “the reasonable abuse” of his friends for having urged them to attend. He also came away with lifelong enmity towards Roosevelt, fully crediting Pinchot—and not the president—for the forest conservation movement’s policies and achievements.

Notwithstanding the president’s stunning attack, Weyerhaeuser delivered his speech, focusing on what businessmen needed before they would consider “conservative lumbering,” which foresters then defined as selection cutting and natural regeneration. Standard practice for timber companies, by contrast, was “cut out and get out” logging, which left them constantly looking for new timberlands. As a consequence of clearcutting, in 1900, as harvesting in the Lake States began to slow, the Weyerhaeusers and 15 partners

purchased 900,000 acres of timberland in Washington from the Northern Pacific Railway; it was, at that time, the largest private land transaction in American history.

Before the company could adopt forestry on these lands, however, it and its industry peers needed reform on three main areas of concern—time, fire, and taxes. These were the subject of Weyerhaeuser’s brief speech to the congress, reprinted below. He acknowledged that few lumbermen had an appropriate understanding of forestry or the time (and scientific knowledge) needed to grow new crops of trees. But he was willing to work with government foresters to learn more; in fact, in 1903, F. E. requested that Chief Pinchot send an expert forester to northern Minnesota to investigate the possibility of harvesting successive crops of timber from the company’s cutover lands.³ The pessimistic report confirmed F. E.’s hunch—a profitable plan of reproduction would require state and federal cooperation. Only cooperation could remove the two main impediments to profitability: the grave fire risk, which required more money and manpower than any one company could reasonably supply, and the excessive tax burden faced while carrying unproductive lands until the new timber crop matured.

With the support of the Forest Service, the government eventually came around on these issues. Soon after its establishment in 1905, the Forest Service set up research stations around the country to study growth rates of merchantable timber in various climates. The Weeks Act (1911) and the Clarke-McNary Act (1924) provided the funds (and incentives) for states to fight forest fires. Tax relief took longer to achieve. At the Forest Service’s urging, several western states in the late 1920s and early 1930s began to pass laws that placed a basic tax on the land and only



F. E. Weyerhaeuser, several years after he attended the 1905 Forest Congress (below). The congress provided an unexpected introduction to the rough-and-tumble world of national politics.

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collected a timber tax when the trees were harvested. In 1944, Congress passed legislation authorizing lumber companies to report income from timber sales as capital gains instead of as conventional income. With the tax burden eased, companies found it more economically attractive to reforest the land, with the added impact of stabilizing land ownership.

In the years following the American Forest Congress, the Weyerhaeuser company took an active interest in forest conservation and emphasized the importance of public-private cooperation. Industrial support of cooperation on fire fighting came easily, in part because of the immediate difference it made. Manpower from New Deal programs in the 1930s made it possible to effectively fight forest fires as never before. Unlike many rival lumbermen, F. E. bought into the Forest Service's advocacy of sustained yield and selective cutting early on. However, as he makes clear towards the end of the speech, he would embrace these principles only if it made economic sense to do so, and

argued that adopting conservative lumber practices made the most sense on public land.

As F. E. rose through the ranks of the company over the next few decades, he looked for opportunities to establish these reforms. In the late 1920s, the company began implementing sustained-yield forestry on an experimental basis. During his presidency of the company (1934–45), and with the assistance of the Forest Service, the company assumed leadership in sustained-yield forestry with the establishment of Clemons Tree Farm in western Washington in 1941, the nation's first tree farm; on it, the company conducted reforestation experiments. Adopting selective cutting on Weyerhaeuser lands proved more complicated. Company foresters refused to believe that the practice was cost-effective, and only implemented it when ordered to do so by the Weyerhaeusers themselves.⁴ With its implementation, the three concerns F. E. Weyerhaeuser had raised in his 1905 speech had finally been addressed.

“INTEREST OF LUMBERMEN IN CONSERVATIVE FORESTRY”⁵

BY F. E. WEYERHAEUSER, WEYERHAEUSER LUMBER COMPANY, 1905

Practical forestry ought to be of more interest and importance to lumbermen than to any other class of men. Unfortunately, they have not always appreciated this fact. There has been a firmly rooted idea that forestry was purely theoretical and incapable of application in a business way; a prejudice which, in large part through the influence of the Bureau of Forestry, is now beginning to disappear. At present lumbermen are ready to consider seriously any proposition which may be made by those who have the conservative use of the forests at heart.

Lumbermen have been averse also to uniting their interests with those of the government, because of a doubt of the business efficiency of some of the Government's work, and this in spite of the fact, which they recognize, that every possible step should be taken to protect the national land and timber from depredations.

The work of first importance in bringing about the adoption of practical forestry is the work of education. For this, every possible means of reaching the public mind must be employed, and above all the object lesson of practical forestry applied on the ground.

Everywhere throughout our timber regions Nature is struggling to renew her growth, and mere casual observation forces upon us the fact that the forests will reproduce themselves, if given a fair chance. But there are three great obstacles which must be reckoned with in the profitable reproduction of timber, viz.: time, fire and taxes. Let us consider them briefly.

First, as to time. Few lumbermen have watched the growth of timber long enough to know what its increase is. Forestry is a new idea to us, and we have given little thought to the future. Furthermore, forest growth varies greatly in different climates, and in different varieties of trees in the same climate. Before he

can consider forestry the lumberman must know the rate of annual growth and the cost of protecting the forests. This information the forester is able to give him. In other words, to tell how long it will take to produce a merchantable tree, and the average per acre. Knowing these facts, it is a comparatively simple matter to determine whether a given forest can be maintained, and yet made to yield satisfactory returns to the owner. Throughout the South particularly, conditions are very favorable and promising. The reports of the Bureau of Forestry lead us to believe confidently that there will be a profit in raising short leaf yellow pine timber, provided that the history of the increase in timber values in the North is repeated in the South, of which there seems to be no doubt. On the Pacific Coast also the climate is suited for the steady and rapid growth of excellent timber. At the present time values there are too low to insure any profit in conservative forestry, but a few years will undoubtedly bring about very different conditions.

The average manufacturer holds too little land to supply his mills indefinitely at the present annual cut. To secure a permanent supply from his present holdings, either they must be increased or his mill capacity must be cut down. Eventually the big mills must disappear, and in their place we shall have smaller but permanent ones. The fact that cut-over lands are covered with young growth, which before many years will be of merchantable size, will add greatly to their value, which will increase more and more as our timber supply diminishes. Moreover, we understand that it is the policy of the Bureau of Forestry not to recommend the adoption of working plans where they cannot be carried out profitably. When business men fully appreciate this fact, it will go far toward securing their cooperation.

The next obstacle, more important because it is harder to overcome, is fire. I am frank enough to say that in this matter lumbermen themselves are largely responsible, sometimes even to the extent of fighting reform. For example: two years ago a bill was proposed in Minnesota providing for the burning of slashings. Because of the opposition of the lumbermen it was never reported out of the committee. Since then the Government has required the burning of slashings on the Leech Lake Indian Reservation. The wise and moderate regulations suggested by the Bureau of Forestry were introduced with complete success. It was a splendid object lesson. A wisely-drawn bill presented to the Legislature to-day would be supported by the best of lumbermen.

But the lumberman is not only culprit but sufferer also, and he must be protected against loss from fire by the rigid enforcement of proper laws. With a sufficient patrol during dry seasons, and reasonable care on the part of those who start fires, this source of awful destruction can certainly be checked, though it never can be entirely eliminated.

The final obstacle is taxes. If anywhere, it is here that the lumberman practicing forestry under present conditions will be checked, for the lumberman, more than any other manufacturer, is the subject of heavy taxation. The local assessor feels that the timber may soon be cut, and that he must "make hay while the sun shines." This policy of drastic taxation results inevitably in the slashing of the timber and the complete destruction of the forest. Here, as before, we meet with the urgent necessity of missionary work in the interest of the forest.

It has been suggested that land held for forestry purposes be taxed with special leniency, or perhaps that the bulk of the tax be transferred from the standing timber to the logs when cut. It certainly is not just that land which can produce but one crop in forty years should be taxed on the same scale as land which produces an annual crop. "Death by taxation" would be the coroner's verdict on many a magnificent forest now laid low. Assuming that the land held for forestry purposes is valuable only for timber, the State would far better collect a low annual tax over a long period of years than levy a heavy tax for a short period; and this is obvious when we consider that an important industry is thus maintained, and a considerable and constant pay-roll secured.

The conclusion we reach with reference to private effort is, that forestry is practical, and can be applied profitably, under favorable conditions; but that only by tremendous effort can the lumberman himself, the legislator and the voter be made to realize its importance and its possibilities. Much has already been done, and we congratulate the Agricultural Department and the Bureau of Forestry on the able and efficient manner in which

information is being disseminated. It is safe to predict that their efforts will be followed by actual results.

All arguments in favor of the adoption of conservative lumbering by the individual are still more forcible and conclusive when used concerning the adoption of them by the State or the National Government on forest reserves. The question of taxes is at once disposed of, the fire situation is in the hands of those who have ample authority to enforce laws, and the net results in profits can be figured on the lowest possible basis. Furthermore, the State has vital interests far beyond those of the individual—such as the regulation of the water supply in streams, the benefit of forest areas from the standpoint of health and recreation, the perpetual maintenance of a timber supply with its future effect on the price of forest products within the State; the making productive of otherwise useless land, and the maintenance of a valuable industry. For these and for many other reasons far-sighted lumbermen favor the rapid increase of State and National Forest Reserves, provided they are established only on proper lands.

In conclusion let me say that it was the desire of the Honorable President of this Congress that Mr. F. Weyerhaeuser, of St. Paul, should address the convention. Mr. Weyerhaeuser wishes me to say that he sincerely regrets his inability to be here, and further to assure those present that he and his associates in the lumber business are thoroughly in sympathy with the work and plans of the Association and the Bureau of Forestry, and stand ready to do whatever is in their power to cooperate in them. □

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NOTES

1. F.E. Weyerhaeuser to C. Davis Weyerhaeuser, February 25, 1932, Forest History Society Archives. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from this letter.
2. Theodore Roosevelt, "The Forest in the Life of a Nation," *Proceedings of the American Forest Congress* (Washington, D.C.: American Forestry Association, 1905), 4, 10–11.
3. Ralph W. Hidy, Frank Ernest Hill, and Allan Nevins, *Timber and Men: The Weyerhaeuser Story* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1963), 380.
4. *Ibid.*, 502–03.
5. F.E. Weyerhaeuser, "Interest of Lumbermen in Conservative Forestry," *Proceedings of the American Forest Congress* (Washington, D.C.: American Forestry Association, 1905), 137–41.

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