

THE WEEKS ACT OF MARCH 1, 1911 A CONSERVATION ACHIEVEMENT FOR THE AGES

Preface: A century ago, people of vision, conviction and courage made conservation history. They overcame entrenched self-interest and destructive practices that had laid waste to much of the land of the east and south. The outcome was an initiative that focused on the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run. Their actions created treasures from abandoned lands – long term public benefit in lieu of short term gain.

We will never know all their names, but their success in establishing the eastern National Forests (those Forests east of the 100th meridian), will stand as monuments to their foresight, initiative, and lives well lived. These Forests are truly the peoples Forests, created with the consent of States and local governments, and restored thru generations of cooperative effort and consistent caring for the land.

The high water mark of their achievements was passed by Congress on March 1, 1911. The Weeks Act as it is known today was a new concept in this country. It was administered by a fledgling Agency, and supported by individuals, conservation organizations, States and local governments. These eastern National Forests continue to grow in significance as our population grows and land use changes crowd out the open space that we once took for granted.

Today, our country is often deeply divided by a host of issues, and progress seems almost impossible. What better time to celebrate what can be done when people of good will work together for a common goal. We now have a great opportunity to reflect on the legacy of the Weeks Act and its champions, and to capture forever this important legacy that began 100 years ago.

Background:

As the 19th century drew to a close, the public attitude toward its public lands began to change. The national land policy, which had focused on placing public land into private hands quickly and easily, slowly evolved to maintain federal control over some lands. There were many reasons for the change, including graft and corruption in administration of the public land laws, concerns about special places, and the adverse consequences stemming from unrestrained exploitation of the natural resources. Early signs of this change in attitude included the Yellowstone National Park legislation in 1872 and the Forest Reserve Act of 1891. President Teddy Roosevelt, an ardent conservationist, created 194,505,000 acres of Forest Reserves (which were to become National Forests) by the end of his administration in 1909.

However, these actions involved setting aside or reserving what was already public land in the western United States for specific public purposes. There was no general authority for the federal government to establish National Forests on the privately owned lands in the eastern half of the country. As the harvesting of the old growth timber finished in the northeast and moved south, the effects of this activity became evident. There were major forest fires which intensified land erosion and flooding. Timber companies left the now cut-over land behind – taxes were often not paid and the lands became the property of the counties and states.

Conservation organizations (a new concept at the time) that had formed in the north and south worked hard to create National Forests in the east. The initial focus was on northern New England and the southern Appalachians, but support soon grew beyond these areas. President Theodore Roosevelt strongly supported a 1902 report to the Congress by the Secretary of Agriculture recommending the

establishment of a National Forest Reserve in parts of the Southern Appalachians. The Forest Service, the State Geologist of North Carolina, The Appalachian National Forest Reserve Association, the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, The Appalachian Mountain Club, The American Forestry Association, and many others worked tirelessly to establish National Forests in the northeast and southern Appalachians and beyond. They had to overcome a lukewarm reception in Congress and the strong objections of a few powerful members of Congress who felt they should not appropriate “one cent for scenery” .

As a result of strong public support, the Weeks Act of March 1, 1911 was passed with the leadership of Massachusetts Representative John W. Weeks. The act allowed the Government to purchase important private watershed land on the headwaters of navigable streams for the purpose of “conserving the navigability of navigable rivers.” This act is the reason that there are any eastern National Forests today. It also provided for cooperation with, and federal matching funds for, State forest fire protection agencies. This was the first time that direct Federal funding of non- Federal programs of any type was allowed, and the action expanded the responsibilities of the recently formed (1908) State and Private Forestry branch. Most importantly, this act set in motion what many would recognize as the most significant conservation achievements in the history of the United States.

This legislation was only the beginning. The act required that a State had to pass enabling legislation before any land could be acquired within its boundaries. Appropriations had to be obtained, staffs developed and trained, and policies and safeguards put in place. The Weeks Act also established the National Forest Reservation Commission (NFRC), and any proposed purchase units, and each subsequent purchase had to be approved by this Congressional Commission.

State enabling legislation often required approval of various state entities. The Forest Service also made it a policy to obtain the approval of county officials before any land was acquired within their jurisdiction. There are many stories behind the establishment of every National Forest in the east.

On March 27, 1911, the Chief of the Forest Service submitted 13 proposed purchase units (lands identified as having areas within a specified boundary worthy of purchase) to the The National Forest Reservation Commission for approval. They approved 11 of these purchase units located in the White Mountains of New England and in the southern Appalachians.

While many more Purchase Units were established over the next 18 years, over half that were to become National Forests were established during the Great Depression. Forest lands were being abandoned for taxes and landowners were eager to sell. A local public, desiring any program that would bring federal investment to their area, along with many who wanted to see better conservation and a public land base for all the people, gave a continuing impetus to the establishment of National Forests in the east.

The creation of these National Forests was a wonder in itself. However, the job had just begun for the Forest Service. Many of these lands had been cut over, burned over, or farmed out. For the first time in its short history, the Agency now had the responsibility of restoring entire forested ecosystems across diverse landscapes. This included establishing effective fire control, stabilizing eroding areas, re-vegetating areas where fire and storms had removed much of the topsoil, planting trees, introducing professional forestry practices, dealing with trespass, controlling wild hogs, improving access to the public lands, creating and managing recreation facilities, inventories and management plans for the resources and infrastructure of these new units, and many other activities. A great many agencies, organizations, and individuals helped with this effort. One of the most effective in improving the

condition of these new eastern National Forests was the Civilian Conservation Corps of the Great Depression. Trees were planted, erosion problems solved, roads, bridges and dams built, recreation areas constructed, and fire fighting was improved.

Given all the challenges, it is a wonder that this effort to create eastern National Forests succeeded. However, 100 years later, 26 eastern States are home to 52 National Forests encompassing 25,462,914 National Forest System acres (about 6.8% of the forested land in the 26 States). These National Forests include all kinds of forested environments, ranging from the White Mountains of New Hampshire to the lakes of northern Minnesota, from the hardwood forests of the southern Appalachians to the piney woods of the coastal plain and pine/hardwood forests of the piedmont.

The success of these efforts is very evident today. There are now 132 Congressionally designated Wilderness areas where there once were stumps and debris. There are 34 National Wild and Scenic Rivers, 9 National Recreation Areas, 16 National Game Refuges and Wildlife Preserves, over 27,000 miles of hiking trails, (including 848 miles of the Appalachian Trail), more than 3700 developed recreation sites, and over 53 million recreation visits to these eastern National Forests each year. Numerous organizations expand the scope and reach of the National Forests thru programs they administer under land use permits from the Forest Service. The timber resource, which in many cases was practically nonexistent when these lands were acquired, now totals an estimated 42 billion billion cubic feet of growing stock and about 135 billion board feet of sawtimber. Streams that were degraded and choked with silt now flow with clear, clean, high quality water. Numerous municipal water supplies depend on National Forest watersheds that provide a stable source of clean water to their communities. Wildlife habitats were reestablished and managed. Hunters and fishermen now enjoy some of the best outdoor experiences in the east as the fish and game have returned to many of these cooperatively managed habitats. As our population grows and encroaches into more and more formerly rural areas, the presence of these large areas of public land become increasingly important as places of respite and re-creation.

As we reflect back on this outstanding accomplishment, we should also remember that there is still work to be done. World War II stopped all land acquisition as our country's resources were focused on the war effort. As a result, several of the newer eastern National Forests have fragmented ownership patterns, while others had critical gaps in important resource areas. After WWII, there were very limited Weeks Law appropriations for acquisition. The 1965 passage of the Land and Water Conservation Fund provided another source of funding for land purchases under the authority of the Weeks Act. However, while substantial monies have periodically been available under the Fund, annual appropriations have never approached what was available and have varied greatly thru the years.

We can best commemorate and honor the incredible achievements of the past 100 years by continuing to manage these eastern National Forests with care and professionalism, always looking for ways to enhance the values they provide to our citizens. These lands are of particular value because the legislative mandate to manage for multiple uses provides options for the future. The benefits from these public lands will continue to grow as the nation's population increases.