



The Weeks Act: A Story of Perseverance

Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell
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Good morning! This symposium gives us an opportunity to reflect on the importance of the Weeks Act for the future of conservation. I'd like to thank the Pinchot Institute and the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies here at Yale for cosponsoring this event.

I've been asked to talk about what the Weeks Act might mean for us today. At first glance, its relevance might not seem obvious. Sure, it gave us the authority to establish national forests in the East, and it set the stage for cooperative wildland fire management as we know it.

But these achievements are, for the moment, a done deal. For now, we face limits on our ability to acquire public land or to support the purchase of new conservation easements. We also face a suspicion of climate change science. Given this context, what relevance does the Weeks Act still have?

Actually, quite a bit. From a public policy perspective, the climate at the turn of the 20th century was similar in some ways to our situation today. So maybe there is a lesson we can learn.

We often think of the turn of the 20th century as a Golden Age of conservation, when great visionaries led the way, people like Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and John Muir. But the prevailing wisdom at the time had little to do with conservation. Gifford Pinchot put it this way:

When the Gay Nineties began, the common word for our forests was "inexhaustible." To waste timber was a virtue and not a crime. ... 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.

Many in Congress opposed federal spending for forest protection. They said it was unconstitutional, and they passed legislation in 1907 stripping the President of his authority to designate a national forest. The last thing congressional leaders wanted was to expand the national forests into the East. In 1901, when a bill was first 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.

It was a terrible climate for sound public 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.

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So what changed? It was events. Undeniable events happened, graphic events that caught the nation's eye, that seized the public 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 called it “skinning the land,” and it is barely imaginable today. Nearly two-thirds of the net forest loss in the entire history of our country came in the second half of the 19th century, mainly due to forest clearing for timber and agriculture. Everywhere Americans looked, they saw huge areas of forest being leveled.

Deforestation led to watershed degradation, followed by catastrophic floods. In 1889, more than 2,000 people died in a flood in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. In 1907, heavy rains came again to the Ohio Valley. Homes floated downriver, and Pittsburgh factory workers stood up to their knees in river mud.

And then came the legendary fires of 1910. In the Northern Rockies, hot dry winds whipped smoldering flames into the perfect firestorm. In two days, the winds blew fire across more than a million acres. Scores of firefighters died; entire towns were destroyed.

That was the last straw. Public pressure had already been building for Congress to finally do something about protecting forests and watersheds. Many eastern members of Congress were already onboard; after the Big Blowup, many westerners were onboard, too. In 1911, the Weeks Act became law.

The rest is history. Over the next 40 years, 25 million acres of land that had been cut over, burned over, and farmed out were added to the National Forest System. Today, there are 52 national forests east of the Mississippi, all of them furnishing clean water to millions of Americans—and other services as well, such as erosion control, carbon sequestration, habitat for wildlife, and opportunities for outdoor recreation. Our mixed ownerships in the East lend themselves to landscape-scale conservation, and today we have the collaborative authorities, through the Weeks Act and other measures, to work across borders and boundaries for watershed protection—for the long-term health of the lands we all share.

The Weeks Act became law because it was an idea whose time had come. It was the right answer to the tremendous conservation challenges facing America in 1911. Today, the challenges are different; the greatest threats might come from bulldozers and cement trucks on private land. Over the past two decades, America has been losing about 6,000 acres of open space to development a day—about 4 acres a minute. Losing forests at this rate is clearly not sustainable.

Today, we need conservation partnerships to protect our forested landscapes. The Weeks Act and other statutes give us a legacy of cooperative fire management, insect and disease control, and watershed protection. Forest Legacy and other cooperative forestry programs have given us increased flexibility for cooperation with state and tribal governments and with private

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landowners to provide for the long-term conservation of forests. We can build on that legacy to establish the partnerships we need.

And we can broaden support for conservation by telling its story. Conservation is a powerful narrative, one that rests on fact and science. We need to continue to talk about the facts and the science behind the story of conservation, 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 I am confident that, in the end, conservation will succeed.

So I would ask you, at this symposium and beyond, in the course of the panels you will hear and the dialogues you will have, to explore how we can build on the foundations laid by the Weeks Act to broaden the circle of conservation. I would ask you to think about how we can broaden our partnerships to meet the conservation challenges of our time.

Thank you.