



The Weeks Act: A Legacy of Partnerships

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Good afternoon! It's a pleasure to be here to participate in this symposium. I have been asked to help close it out, and I will do so by offering some thoughts on the implications of the Weeks Act for the future of conservation. Yesterday, Chief Tidwell noted the importance of broadening the circle of conservation. We need to engage more Americans in conservation, and the Weeks Act centennial gives us an opportunity to do that by reframing our story.

Squaring Our Story with the Facts

As Chief Tidwell pointed out, facts are stubborn things. For the story we tell to resonate with the American people, it needs to square with the facts.

One rationale for the system of federal forest reserves that began in 1891 was fear of a timber famine. That fear was understandable. At the time, deforestation was rampant in the eastern United States, and wood was crucial to the American economy. Wood played a huge role in energy, heating, transportation, manufacturing, and construction. Americans depended on a resource they saw disappearing from their landscapes, and they got scared.

Fear of a timber famine was a good story for conservation, but our forest resources turned out to be remarkably resilient. Today, with less than 8 percent of the world's forests, the United States is by far the largest wood-producing nation in the world. Per capita, Americans still use a lot of wood, three times more than the global average, and we rely increasingly on imports.

Another rationale for forest protection at the turn of the 20th century was the hope that it would prevent catastrophic floods. The early conservationists were right: Deforestation does contribute to floods and erosion. But it does not necessarily follow that a well-forested watershed never gets

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floods. Since 1907, the Northeast and Upper Midwest have recovered a lot of forest; forest land across these regions has grown by nearly 19 percent. Still, heavy rains this spring contributed to near-record flooding in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. Water spread across millions of acres of farmland, along with parts of Cairo, Memphis, Vicksburg, and other towns.

Another important opportunity was enhanced fire control. The Big Burn of 1910 shocked the nation. Fires swept across roughly 3 million acres in the Northern Rockies, and Forest Service firefighters were overwhelmed. Scores of firefighters died in the August Big Blowup, and their heroism and sacrifice became legend, building tremendous goodwill for the Forest Service. After 1910, our budgets shot up; the Weeks Act finally passed; we gradually added 25 million acres to the National Forest System in the East; and we developed the cooperative system of wildland fire management we know today.

Investing in America's Green Infrastructure

Times have changed, and there is much we have learned. Our approach has changed accordingly, and so has the story of conservation. A hundred years ago, forested landscapes were blasted by rapacious logging, uncontrollable fires, enormous floods, and thoughtless abuse. We responded by setting aside protected areas, including the national forests in the East, and we tried to banish fire and floods. We now know that these and other disturbances play key ecological roles in healthy ecosystems, and we are learning to live with them.

We also know that protected areas have other values for Americans; investments in America's green infrastructure have payoffs for generations to come. A century ago, opponents of conservation challenged the value of federal spending, as if every government dollar spent was a taxpayer dollar wasted.

These are austere budget times but we should not put our heads down and pretend to be victims. We must be part of the solution. Events like this – the 100 year anniversary of the Weeks Act – along with the America Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, America's Great Outdoors,

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and the International Year of the Forest provide us with opportunities to demonstrate our role in fiscal restraint and to highlight the public value of the work we do. We now know that congressional allocations on behalf of conservation generate economic activity, including rural communities hard hit by recession. For example, spending by visitors to the national forests and grasslands contributes over \$14 billion annually to GDP, sustaining more than 224,000 jobs. By comparison, the total Forest Service budget is about \$5 billion per year. Do the math, and you get a return of almost three dollars for every taxpayer dollar spent—and that's just for outdoor recreation. Counting timber, grazing, mining, and other economic activities, the returns are even higher. According to an estimate in 2005, the returns were more than \$19 billion annually—almost four dollars for every taxpayer dollar spent.

And that's just the returns on services with marketplace value. Americans also get many other services from their national forests and grasslands. Ecosystem services are vital to creating and sustaining jobs and the health and well-being of our communities, both rural and urban, even if their value isn't always recognized in the marketplace. Ecosystem services from forests include supporting services such as soil formation and primary production; provisioning services such as water delivery and wild foods—wild salmon come to mind; regulating services such as pollination and carbon sequestration; and cultural services such as aesthetic enjoyment and spiritual renewal. In short, America's public lands are a form of natural capital, and part of our job at the Forest Service is to measure the stocks and flows of the ecosystem services they provide to make sure that the people who rely on these services know their value and the cost of losing them. The Weeks Act Centennial gives us an opportunity to do so effectively at a most opportune time.

For example, more than 60 million Americans get their water from the National Forest System, and the annual value of that water is more than \$7.2 billion for both instream and offstream uses. That value alone is worth more than our entire annual budget. The Forest Service uses congressional allocations, partner contributions, and proceeds from fees and sales to invest in the natural capital needed to furnish a full range of ecosystem services—clean air and water, habitat

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for wildlife, carbon sequestration and storage, and more. In so doing, the agency plays the traditional government role of delivering public goods from public lands.

Investing in Partnerships

Today, America's forested landscapes are again under siege, but the challenges are not the same as they were a hundred years ago. Nor is our response the same.

- Climate change is contributing to regional drought. Despite heavy winter snowfall and wet spring weather across many of our northern states, drought persists across our southernmost tier of states. As you know, weather extremes—hot and cold, wet and dry—are consistent with climate change, and they are likely to continue.
- Climate change is partly responsible for the worsening fire seasons we are experiencing . Climate change has also allowed bark beetles to multiply and spread, killing pine and other forest types across vast parts of the West.
- Nonnative insects and diseases are threatening major forest trees, ranging from oak, to ash, to walnut, to eastern hemlock, to western white pine, to high-elevation whitebark pine; and more than 100 million acres of rangeland have been degraded by invasive weeds such as cheatgrass.
- As the U.S. population grows, land use conversion is threatening private forests, which make up 56 percent of our forest land nationwide—and 83 percent in the East. Susan Stein talked yesterday about the substantial increases in housing density we are likely to see.
- Food and energy prices are rising around the world, and biofuels are increasingly feasible as an energy source. How does the United States coordinate its forest, food, and energy policies to keep productive forest land from being converted to agriculture?

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These are enormous challenges. They are as great as any challenges we have ever faced, and we cannot hope to meet them through public land management alone. These challenges cross borders and boundaries, affecting all ownerships across entire landscapes. If people continue to work in isolated ways—cut off from each other as private foresters on this piece of land, as public land managers on that piece of land—then America will never fully tap its resources of knowledge, energy, and ideas. But if people come together to collaborate across landownerships and landscapes, then we will be able to address shared issues and concerns and to pursue common goals.

Accordingly, the Forest Service is taking an all-lands approach to meeting the conservation challenges of the future. That includes reaching out to urban Americans, who make up 80 percent of our population. Forests do not end where cities begin; forests, rivers and streams, bind together landscapes. They reach from remote wilderness areas, across the farmer’s “back forty,” to shady neighborhood streets and parks. Urban forests alone cover an area the size of California, and they are a vital resource for the people we serve.

Conservation begins where people live because people care about the natural resources around them. Through place-based conservation, we can engage a broader cross-section of Americans in the conservation issues we face across landscapes. An all-lands, all-hands approach to conservation means broadening the circle of conservation to include Americans at every scale, from every community, from every background, from every walk of life.

Collaboration Is Key

Passage of the Weeks Act was an uphill battle. In the 19th century, America’s natural riches were widely abused, and the abuses were widely tolerated. But conservationists persevered, and in the end they succeeded. Through the Weeks Act and later measures, we obtained a variety of tools for conservation, including land acquisitions and support for conservation easements.

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For now, these tools are not used as effectively as we wish. But the Weeks Act teaches perseverance, and we have other tools to help us persevere. The Weeks Act set the stage for deciding how the great majority of America's forests would be managed, the forests that lie beyond national forest boundaries. The Weeks Act and subsequent legislation set the stage for the system of cooperative forestry we have today, a system based on shared resources, partnerships, and collaboration.

Partnerships and collaboration are key. Our goal is to engage all Americans in the story of conservation by showing the economic benefits and other values they get from America's forests and grasslands; by showing that these lands and waters are interconnected across landscapes; by showing the growing risks to the continued delivery of ecosystem services; and by showing the promise of working together across borders and boundaries to reach shared goals.

Through its provisions for acquiring vast, spectacular National Forest System lands, the Weeks Act laid a lasting foundation for partnerships, collaboration, and landscape scale restoration. I think that in many ways, the Weeks Act has given us more than we often consider. It has given us a way of thinking about private forest conservation through cooperative forestry, a way of restoring forested lands, important watershed through public land management, and an improved approach for fire suppression. But the real genius is not each part, but the intersection of those parts, the interconnectedness of those parts. It has enabled us to effectively consider landscapes, collaboration, communities in a synergistic, holistic manner. Just what we need. Right now.

If we can expand the understanding, appreciation, and support for conservation among all Americans, then I am confident that conservation will succeed, as it did a hundred years ago, for the benefit of generations to come.

Thank you.