

Forest Service



As with many older agencies of the U.S. federal government, the functions of the U.S. Forest Service can be traced back to colonial roots. In this case, the needs of the British navy for timber resulted in policies reserving the harvesting of certain hardwood trees for that purpose. In Britain by the end of the seventeenth century the same concerns had led to the development of forest management programs based on the new science of siveiculture. But while government policies related to the active husbandry of forests spread throughout Europe during the 1700s, there was

little perceived need for similar policies in the American colonies given the seemingly unlimited supply of timber.

After the American Revolution the concern for reserving certain types of tree harvesting for government purposes was replaced by a broader concern for acquiring and disposing of public lands, many of them forests. States relinquished claims on lands west to the Mississippi River to the national government, and these were eventually placed under the jurisdiction of the General Land Office. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and purchase of Florida from Spain in 1819 added to the burden of the Land Office, as did the annexation of Texas in 1845 and the large tracts of land gained from the Mexican War and through the Gadsden Purchase in 1853. Millions of additional acres were added in 1867, when Secretary of State William H. Seward arranged for the purchase of Alaska from Russia. Thus, by the late 1800s the national government had considerable land holdings, many dense with trees. The objective of the Land Office, however, was disposing of—not managing—those lands.

A perceived need for U.S. government to engage in forest management first emerged during the Civil War. The stimulant for this interest was the 1863 publication of a book by George Perkins Marsh on *Man and Nature*. Arguing that man damages himself by damaging nature, Marsh's work proved popular and converged with both a growing fascination with nature (already in evidence in the antebellum North) and the intellectual revolution sparked by publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in the late 1850s. Among those most profoundly influenced was a New England physician, Franklin B. Hough, who lobbied Congress to deal with what he contended was a coming timber famine.

Congress's willingness to take action came slowly, aided by events as well as the growing popularity of Marsh's ideas. A key event was an 1871 forest fire in Wisconsin that took fifteen hundred lives and burned over a million acres of woods. The call for a forest management policy gained further ground two years later when Hough's paper "On the Duty of Government in the Protection of Forests" was enthusiastically received by members of the influential American

Association for the Advancement of Science. Congress responded with the Timber Culture Act of 1873, which encouraged tree planting by settlers in the Great Plains states. Although of little real significance, the act set the stage for further government action. In 1875 the lobbying effort was strengthened with the formation of the American Forestry Association, and soon forestry curricula began to appear at agricultural colleges.

In 1876 legislation to establish forest reserves adjacent to navigable rivers was seriously considered by Congress. Although the bill ultimately failed to pass, the fact that it was on the congressional agenda reflected the growing acceptance of the idea that the nation's forests needed greater government attention.

What did pass in 1876 was a bill calling for the appointment of a "special agent" in the Department of Agriculture to study how best to preserve and renew America's forest resources. Hough was named that special agent, and in 1878 he delivered a report that documented the need for forest protection policies and programs. By 1881 Hough was able to convince Congress to establish a Division of Forestry within the Agriculture Department with a budget of \$2,000, and he was appointed the nation's first chief forester with the mandate to conduct further studies. What he was not given was authority over any of the forest land held by the federal government. That remained under the Land Office.

Hough served as chief forester until 1883, when he was replaced by a patronage appointee who did little to build on the foundation Hough had set. From 1886 to 1898, however, Bernhard Eduard Fernow, the former head of the American Forestry Association and a professional forester (trained in his native Germany, where forestry had developed into a major science), took over at the division (which consisted of two foresters during much of this period). Fernow established the agency's reputation as a primary leader in the effort to expand the government's role in forest preservation and management.

As did Hough, Fernow actively lobbied Congress to create forest reserves, and in 1891 it did so with passage of the Forest Reserve Act. Within a year fifteen reserves covering thirteen million acres had been set aside; by 1897 that figure had

risen to forty million acres. There was, however, no provision in the 1891 act for the administration of those new reserves. Jurisdiction remained with the Department of the Interior's General Land Office, which had no experience at managing forests and complained bitterly that it had neither the funds nor expertise to do the job. As it did with the national park lands set aside by Congress in earlier legislation (Yellowstone in 1872, Mackinac Island in 1875, and Yosemite, Sequoia, and General Grant parks in 1890)—the Land Office appointed a corps of agents to administer the reserves. In 1897 a Division of Forestry was established within the Land Office, employing over four hundred such agents. Few, if any, of those agents were trained in forestry, and critics of that office constantly pointed to frequent abuses of the forest reserves under Land Office administration, despite the fact that Congress had attempted to address administrative issues in the Forest Management Act of 1897. That act, however, did more harm than good, for its provisions were so phrased as to promote the exploitation of the reserves by private interests.

Among those who worked in the Interior Department during this period was Gifford Pinchot, a charismatic reformer who left that post when he was named to succeed Fernow as chief forester in the Department of Agriculture division in 1898. Openly critical of the Land Office's administration of the forest reserves, he popularized the idea of conservation and, with an initial core group of eleven employees, began to build what would become the modern Forest Service. With no lands of its own to manage, Pinchot's division offered free assistance to private landowners who sought advice on the "scientific" management of their forest holdings. Working with Fernow (who had moved on to teach at Cornell) and others, Pinchot and the division helped to develop forestry schools at Cornell, Vanderbilt, and Yale. With the help of his close friend and supporter Theodore Roosevelt, Pinchot was able to withstand the attack of opponents who believed the division under his leadership had exceeded its legislative authority. When Roosevelt became president, Pinchot's influence was even greater. Finally, faced with popular pressure stirred by Pinchot and Roosevelt as well as stories of wide-

spread scandal and incompetence in the Land Office's Division of Forestry, Congress passed the Transfer Act of 1905, which shifted jurisdiction over all U.S. forest reserves to Pinchot's agency, now recast as the U.S. Forest Service.

Among other accomplishments, and despite strong opposition from several quarters, Pinchot added to and strengthened regulations governing the use of the reserves and was able to get Roosevelt to set aside an additional 132 million acres before the latter left office in 1909. He enhanced the research function of the service and established the first forest experimental stations and cooperative labs with major universities.

Pinchot's confrontational style would not fare as well under President Taft, who dismissed him in 1910 after a bitter and very public dispute. His successor, Henry Graves, spent much time and energy fending off attempts to return jurisdiction over forest reserves to the Interior Department. Beyond the threat of reversing the Transfer Act, the greatest challenge came from the creation of the National Park Service in the Interior Department in 1916. From the outset the Park Service attempted to transfer large portions of the forest reserves to its jurisdiction. [See National Park Service.]

Despite these challenges, the Forest Service was organizationally and politically stronger by the time Graves left his position in 1920. The agency had gained new authority (under the Weeks Act of 1911), allowing it to purchase private lands to help protect watersheds in the East where there had been few or no public landholdings. Until so authorized under Weeks, the agency was limited to acquiring parcels of the public domain as forest reserve land, and all of that from public holdings in the western United States. The Weeks Act also facilitated a greater role for states (through interstate compacts and matching fund grants) in forest management, thus putting the service at the forefront of intergovernmental relations. In 1915 Graves oversaw the establishment of a separate Research Branch, whose activities soon became a high priority in the service. In his final years as head of the service, Graves also led an effort to enhance the regulatory role of the agency, especially in regard to timber cutting practices on private lands. In

short, the active management of America's forests, stressed with political vigor by Pinchot, was the focus of his successor as well.

The agency's regulatory regime changed in 1920 with the appointment of William B. Greeley as chief forester. Greeley's more benign view of the service's relationship with timber and community interests was reflected in the Clarke-McNary Act of 1924, which promoted cooperation with local officials and the private sector. The 1924 act, for example, extended the acquisition powers of the service to cover the purchase or subsidization of privately held land as a means for enhancing timber production. Thus, large timber firms found a friend in the agency, which would acquire underutilized land and make its growth available for harvest. The McSweeney-McNary Act of 1928 reflected congressional support for a greatly expanded experimental and research function that stressed increasing the economic value of public and private forests.

The pendulum swung back toward regulatory tasks under the leadership of Robert Y. Stuart (1928-1933) and Ferdinand A. Silcox (1933-1939). However, while stressing forest management through regulation and public ownership, neither abandoned the idea of cooperation with state and private owners.

Politically, the greatest external threat to the service during the pre-World War II era remained the Interior Department, whose powerful secretary under Franklin Roosevelt, Harold Ickes, coveted the agency and its holdings. Bolstered by the Brownlow Committee's 1938 recommendation that the Forest Service be integrated within similar Interior functions, Ickes obtained the backing of FDR for such a move. But the political atmosphere in Washington was not conducive to such a change, and Roosevelt's support proved lukewarm. In addition, Gifford Pinchot—now a prominent Republican, having served as governor of Pennsylvania—led the strong opposition to the shift. The service survived the period intact.

Internally, during the 1930s the agency was driven by a policy of "intensive management" of all timberlands. The agency's approach was supported by a 1933 congressional study (the Cope-land Report) and FDR's enthusiasm for Forest Ser-

vice projects that fit into the New Deal mold. Of special note was the popular Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which operated for the most part in Forest Service areas. Nevertheless, the policies and programs of the service were controversial in many quarters—so much so that Earle H. Clapp, who served as acting chief forester from 1939 through 1943, could not get Senate confirmation because of opposition to his support of strong regulatory and public ownership policies.

During World War II the Forest Service oversaw the Timber Production War Project, which sought to maximize needed wood production with minimal waste. After the war the pent-up and growing demand for lumber politically outweighed the service's assessment that demand was outpacing supply and that a crisis loomed in the future. The best that could be accomplished under Chief Forester Lyle Watts (1943-1952) was passage of the Cooperative Forest Management Act of 1950, which called for increasing forest management assistance for private landowners and timber firms.

By the time Richard McArdle became chief in 1952, the major problem facing the service was the multiple and sometimes conflicting demands being made on the agency. In addition to the traditional stress on conservation and management for improved timber production, the postwar period had witnessed a push for more recreational use, wilderness preservation, and wildlife protection programs related to the forests. Beyond internal responses to these pressures, McArdle pushed for passage of the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960, which gave the service flexible authority to decide on the "most judicious use of the land" for some or all of several purposes. No longer would priority be placed on timber. There was now a greater degree of discretion given to the Forest Service and its professionals.

Within the Forest Service the push and pull of multiple use demands was aggravated by the diversity of local demands made on the agency. At this time Herbert Kaufman published a classic study of the internal operations of the Forest Service, showing how the agency contended with the tensions created by these conflicting forces. His work not only highlighted agency policies

and practices, but also the high degree of professionalism among the Forest Rangers who were dealing with the contradictions on the line. What emerged from Kaufman's study was a picture of a mature agency that relied on professional consensus to help keep itself together and on track.

Challenges to that professional consensus began to emerge from outside the agency in the mid-1960s. A stronger form of preservationism was developing among conservation and environmental groups, and concern for the environment was becoming politically popular. Legislation such as the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Rare and Endangered Species Act of 1966, the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, and the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 each had a significant and growing impact on Forest Service operations and policies. Chief Edward Cliff (1962–1972) found himself heading an agency that had less and less ability to use the discretion it had fought so hard to get throughout the 1950s. While many in the agency sought to develop more cooperative programs, the mandates from Congress increasingly forced them to engage in regulation.

Eventually the shift in attitudes toward the environment was felt among the ranks of the Forest Service professionals. Ecological studies supported by a variety of government funding agencies soon gained favor among researchers in the service, and the results were a fundamental challenge to the assumptions underlying agency policies and programs. Past debates within the agency had focused on variations of two approaches to forest management—cooperation with or regulation of private sector timber interests. Behind both approaches was a consensus assumption that it was government's role to actively engage in the management of the forests to insure their growth and sustainability. The ecological perspective, however, raised questions about the wisdom of such managerial intervention in natural habitats.

In its most extreme form—often called “deep ecology”—the ecological approach advanced a view that government's role is to protect the nation's forests, and especially “old growth” woods, from any human actions that might interfere in

the “natural” workings of the habitat. This included retreating from the forest management practices that had characterized the service's functions from the outset. Based on a “biocentric” philosophy, the deep ecology movement argued for a change in Forest Service policies that would necessarily place the agency in direct opposition to timber interests. Just such situations developed in the northwestern and southwestern regions of the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. Armed with legislation and court decisions, environmental activists were able to halt or shift Forest Service policies on millions of acres of both public and adjoining private land.

The agency leadership has bent in response to such pressure, but it has not radically altered its fundamental mission or commitments. Before 1994, the Forest Service's mission statement made no reference to ecology, although an “ecological approach” to the management of national forests and grasslands under its jurisdiction was mentioned in 1993 as part of the agency's “guiding principles.” The emphasis was on achieving “quality land management under the sustainable multiple-use management concept to meet the diverse needs of the people.” In 1994, however, the top echelon of the Forest Service were using different “buzzwords” in their mission statements: the primary task for the agency, stated Chief Jack Ward Thomas, was “ecosystems management,” defined as “an approach to the management of natural resources that strives to maintain or restore the sustainability of ecosystems and to provide present and future generations a continuous flow of multiple benefits in a manner harmonious with ecosystem sustainability.” Compared to the agency's mission statement of just a year earlier, the change seemed significant—at least on the surface.

But while some of the key words had changed in 1994, the same could not be said of the underlying mission. The commitment to multiple-use land management was adjusted to the broader concept of ecosystems sustainability. What this meant, however, was little different from the general approach of the service in the past. As articulated in the new language of ecosystems management, the objectives of the service were

to "enhance protection of ecosystems," "restore deteriorated ecosystems," and "provide a variety of benefits within the capabilities of ecosystems." In historical perspective, the break with the past was minimal.

This is not to imply that nothing changed as a result of this reworking of the service's mission. Operationally, the service undertook an extensive review of relevant legislation to consider proposed changes to better fit the new political reality. There was also greater emphasis placed on cooperation with other agencies to deal with the more encompassing ecosystems approach. Personnel training also became an issue as Forest Rangers and others in the agency had to shift from work skills that stressed land management to the new demands of protecting and restoring ecosystems. The shift toward ecological approaches has been most noticeable to timber interests and landowners, who have been extremely critical of the Forest Service's policies in recent years. In the Northwest, issues related to Forest Service policies are placed high on the region's political agenda. In the Southwest, county governments passed ordinances that attempted to nullify service jurisdiction at the local level. Successfully challenged in federal court as unconstitutional, those laws reflected a growing hostility against the Forest Service and other land management agencies that has led to the possibility of violent confrontations between rangers and local property owners.

Despite all these changes and challenges, the structure of the Forest Service remains as it has for decades. Ten regions reporting to a national headquarters deal with the more than 180 million acres of land under the service's jurisdiction.

With the increased attention to mapping and re-framing their task environment, research and experimental stations play an even more critical role in the organization. With its designation as a lead agency under the "reinventing government" initiatives of the Clinton administration, the service has also enhanced its intergovernmental programs and efforts to develop "partnerships" with both local communities and the private sector.

In many respects, the challenges facing the Forest Service of the 1990s are quite different from those it has faced in the past. What the agency has operating in its favor is its proven historical capacity to deal with such challenges in a manner that maintains its founding core values.

[See also Interior, Department of the.]

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Freedom of Information Act.

See Appendix: Basic Documents of Public Administration.