

Robert Beanblossom: Weeks Act helped create Monongahela National Forest

- By Robert Beanblossom
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One of the most important pieces of environmental legislation ever enacted by Congress was the passage of the Weeks Act on March 1, 1911. Named for its chief sponsor, Congressman John Weeks, R-Mass., it was to have a profound effect on West Virginia by providing the statutory authority to create the Monongahela National Forest in 1920. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the forest.

The U.S. Forest Service was established in 1905 and placed in charge of the millions of acres of forest lands that had been set aside from the public domain in the West. However, there was no legal means to purchase private lands for public use and virtually all forest land east of the Mississippi River was in private hands. Nor was there a mechanism to provide federal financial assistance to the various states to assist with implementing needed forest fire control programs. The Weeks Act accomplished both.

Prior to the Act, several bills had floundered in Congress. In an effort to build support for the legislation, states began passing bills to demonstrate their willingness to allow the federal government to purchase land within their boundaries. West Virginia was at the forefront of this movement and the Legislature passed such an act on Feb. 26, 1909, thereby consenting to the purchase of lands which in the opinion of the federal government were necessary for the establishment of a national forest.

Several more years of debate were to follow, but when the Weeks Act finally became a reality, action was swift. Within a week a National Forest Reservation Commission had been appointed and had met for the first time. In anticipation of the law, the Forest Service had been diligently working for many months prior to identify large tracts, primarily on the headwaters of navigable streams, suitable for purchase. These areas, known as “purchase units,” required Commission approval and included land that was to become the Monongahela.

Consent was granted and the very first tract of land acquired in West Virginia was the Arnold Tract, simply known as “Purchase Case No. 1.” On Aug. 7, 1911, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas J. Arnold, of Elkins, offered to sell 7,200 acres in Tucker County to the federal government. The deed for this land, signed Nov. 26, 1915, represented a sizable and valuable first acquisition. Other properties were acquired over the next few years; and by 1920 enough land had been purchased to officially recognize a new national forest. On

April 20, 1920, President Woodrow Wilson signed the proclamation establishing the Monongahela National Forest.

West Virginia officials also responded to the bill's other provision providing federal funds for forest fire protection and entered into an agreement with the federal government on Oct. 16, 1913. The Forest Service, under the terms of this agreement, provided \$5,000 and West Virginia agreed to a like amount. Statewide fire protection efforts began in earnest. In addition, the Weeks Act also created the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests in neighboring Virginia with their purchase unit boundaries dipping over into the state.

Currently, over a million acres are held in trust by the U.S. Forest Service in West Virginia's three national forests. Arguably, these lands comprise the very best West Virginia has to offer. It is hard to visit one of these national forests today and imagine what it looked like at the turn of the century. Indiscriminate logging, rampant wildfires, grazing, the introduction of the chestnut blight and other destructive forces had devastated the landscape.

Take Canaan Mountain in Tucker County as an example. Destructive logging followed by numerous forest fires had literally consumed everything down to bare rock. Crews operating under Forest Service direction worked day and night hauling peat and muck from unburned areas of Canaan Valley to be used in planting Norway spruce on Canaan Mountain. About two bushels of peat were required for each tree planted and about 300,000 trees were planted in this manner. Now abundant forests grow where destruction once reigned.

Under federal stewardship and management, these forests today provide watershed protection, outdoor recreation, timber, critical wildlife habitat and other ecological goods and services to their owners — the people of the United States.

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