

N.C. helps create forests from the trees



Pisgah National Forest 1911

1911 PHOTO - U.S. FOREST SERVICE

North Carolina's Pisgah National Forest was created from mostly cut-over and eroded timberland.

BY BRUCE HENDERSON - The Charlotte Observer

A plaque unveiled Friday on the Blue Ridge Parkway salutes North Carolina's cornerstone role in one of the nation's most ambitious conservation feats.

One century ago this year, the federal government bought 8,100 acres of timberland near Marion. It was the first of many acquisitions that, over time, created national forests that now total 19.7 million acres.

The first transaction paid Burke McDowell Lumber Co. a little over \$7 an acre for its land. It followed approval by Congress of the Weeks Act, which allowed federal money to be used to buy forests for watershed protection.

Then as now, the act's passage followed years of debate over the role of government.

By 1911, national forest reserves already had been created among the expansive public lands in the West. But conservative politicians railed against further expanding government holdings in the East.

A literal cascade of events turned the tide. Violent floods poured out of heavily logged eastern mountains in 1907. Civic leaders wanted to avoid more floods, backing the idea of government lands where forests could be restored and waterways protected. Scientific management of forests took root.

Congress finally passed the Weeks Act a year after wildfires claimed nearly 4 million acres of timber in the northern Rockies. The act appropriated \$9 million to buy 6 million acres in the East and promote fire management.

With strong public support, the Weeks Act became law on March 1, 1911, under the leadership of Rep. John Weeks of Massachusetts. This law allowed for the purchase of the first national

forest lands in the eastern United States. About one-fifth of the nation's clean drinking water has its origins in forests preserved under the Weeks Act.

Suspensions of the government remained in some corners. Only a few generations removed from post-Civil War Reconstruction, some mountaineers envisioned another federal occupation.

"It stoked old flames by saying, here's the federal government wanting to move in and impose its will," said James Lewis, historian with the Forest History Society in Durham.

Early purchases targeted the Southern Appalachian Mountains, the source of many headwater streams across the East and especially in North Carolina. By the end of 1912, 1.4 million acres had been identified for acquisition in the Carolinas, Tennessee, Georgia and Virginia. "The Weeks Act led the way for millions of acres of cut-over, eroded lands to be replanted. Today these lands are national forests.

The government initially bought most of its land from timber companies or land investors eager to sell cut-over land, although nearly a third of the acreage was old-growth forest. The largest tract from a single owner was the 86,700 acres bought for \$433,500 from the Biltmore Estate in 1914. It became the core of North Carolina's Pisgah National Forest. More than 800 miles of the Appalachian Trail wind through forests that were purchased under this act. These same forests provide important habitat for important species including the brook trout, bald eagle and black bear.

During the past 100 years, the Weeks Act led to the creation of 52 national forests in 26 eastern states. North Carolina has become home to the Nantahala, Pisgah, Uwharrie and Croatan national forests. More than 1.2 million acres of forests are now included in these four national forests. These North Carolina national forests now include:

- *11 congressionally designated wilderness areas
- *Three research experimental forests (Bent Creek, Coweeta and Blue Valley)
- *Three National Wild and Scenic Rivers (Horsepasture and Chattooga Rivers and Wilson Creek)
- *One National Historic site (Cradle of Forestry in America)
- * Two National Scenic Byways (Cherohala Skyway and Forest heritage)
- *Nationally designated trails: (Appalachian Trail, Bartram Trail, Uwharrie National Scenic Trail and Overmountain Victory Trail.)
- *About 1,700 miles of trails: hike, bike horse and off-road vehicles.