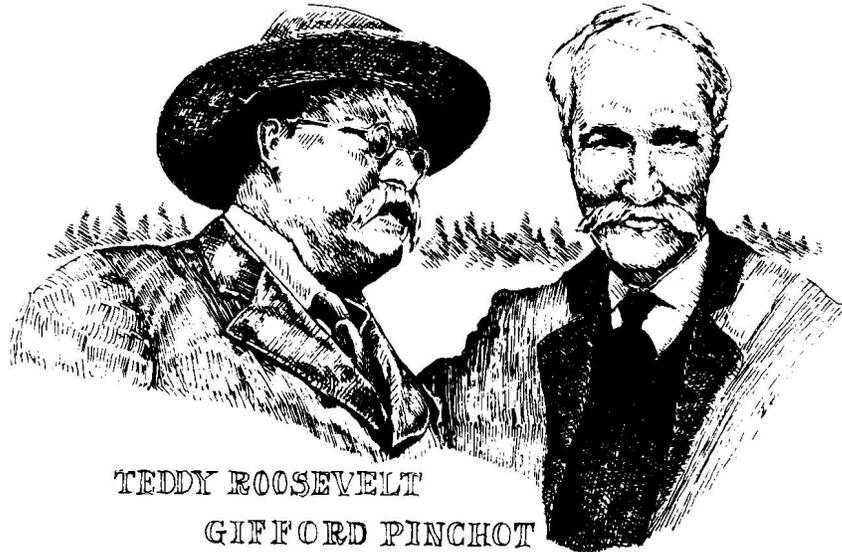


15 Forest Transfer Act of 1905



On February 1, 1905, Congress transferred the administration of the Federal forest reserves from the Department of the Interior's General Land Office to the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Forestry. On March 3, the Bureau of Forestry became the Forest Service and 2 years later the Federal forest re-serves were renamed the national forests. The first Chief ["Forester"] of the Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot, had sought the transfer of the reserves from the time he was appointed Chief of the Division of Forestry in the USDA in 1898.

Pinchot used his access to members of Congress and other opinion leaders in Washington, DC, to argue for the transfer on two basic grounds: first, the General Land Office was staffed by political appointees who lacked the training in forestry required to manage the forest reserves on a scientific basis, and second, the centralization of the General Land Office resulted in long delays in granting lumbering, mining, and grazing permits to local reserve users. Unhappy with the tardiness of the General Land Office, the commercial sector and its allies in Congress supported Pinchot's goal. He even managed to persuade Theodore Roosevelt, who spoke in favor of the transfer when, in 1901, he addressed Congress for the first time after becoming President.

Theodore Roosevelt's personal association with Pinchot began when the two met in 1899, a year after Roosevelt was elected Governor of New York, and Pinchot was on a private forest inspection trip there. Impressed with Pinchot, Roosevelt nominated him for membership in the Boone and Crockett Club, the hunting and game conservation club Roosevelt helped found in 1887 after returning to New York from ranching in South Dakota. After 2 years as Governor, Roosevelt was elected Vice-president in 1900 and, unexpectedly became President after the

assassination of President **William McKinley (1843-1901)**. A lasting legacy of his administration was Federal activity in natural resource conservation, a policy reflecting Roosevelt's personal love of wilderness and nature combined with his political agenda of seeking to manage public natural resources for the common good. The influence of Pinchot in shaping the policy of Roosevelt's administration (1901-09) on conservation issues is attributed to their close personal relationship. Pinchot was Roosevelt's frequent exercise companion during the White House years, accompanying him on horseback rides and acting as his bodyguard when the President eluded his Secret Service agents during their private escapades, which included swimming in Rock Creek.

Pinchot not only had a personal bond with Roosevelt but also served as his advisor on conservation policy. It is this dual linkage that enabled Pinchot to enjoy a level of influence far beyond that of his station as head of a minor Government bureau in Washington, DC.

Pinchot convinced Roosevelt as early as 1901 that the transfer of the Federal forest reserves to the Department of Agriculture would ensure their more efficient management. It may be that this position of Pinchot's is rooted in two beliefs he held: the logic of placing the reserves under the control of trained foresters in the USDA, and his awareness that political support for Government-managed reserves would exist only if the reserves were open to use. Prior to 1905 then, Pinchot was speaking against proposals made by wildlife groups – including the Boone and Crockett Club – that game preserves be set aside in the existing Federal forest reserves, a move opposed by western livestock owners who wanted access for their herds to forage on the reserves. Pinchot further gained favor with livestock interests by his advocating controlled grazing on the reserves at a time when the Secretary of the Interior refused grazing permits. Fears of erosion and other problems caused by overgrazing had led the Secretary of the Interior to ban grazing from 1898 to 1901.

User access to reserves was a realistic policy stemming from the long-held tradition that public-domain natural resources existed for the benefit of the local residents who needed them. Division R (forestry) of the General Land Office in 1901 provided for "free use of timber and stone," allowing settlers, miners, residents, and prospectors the right to remove \$100 worth of timber yearly from reserves. The wood was to be used for firewood, fencing, buildings, mining, and other domestic purposes. Permits for timber harvests valued at over \$100 had to be approved by the Secretary of the Interior, which resulted in unpopular delays between request and final approval.

The continuity of the agenda of user access is found in the guiding policy of the Forest Service, which is first expressed in the 1905 letter of instructions to Gifford Pinchot from Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson (dated February 1, 1905, and drafted by Pinchot) on managing the reserves on the day of their transfer to the Department of Agriculture: "All the resources of forest reserves are for use ...under such restrictions only as will insure [sic] the permanence of these resources." This is the clearest statement of Pinchot's view of conservation or wise use. From the perspective of the foresters in the Forest Service in 1905, three principles were to be followed in

their work: (1) sustained yield, (2) multiple-use, and (3) protection of local communities. The guide book of the agency was the 1905 *Use Book*, which defined the object of the forest reserves as "preserving a perpetual supply of timber for home industries, preventing the destruction of the forest cover which regulates the flow of streams, and protecting local residents from unfair competition in the use of forest and range."

The first forest reserves were created because of a growing awareness in the East of the need for conservation of natural resources and because of conflicts among groups in the West. Cattlemen did not want sheep on forest ranges and irrigation farmers and urban residents wanted watershed protection, including the banning of both logging and grazing on reserves. The stalemate of western forces hindered further creation of reserves, and to end the stalemate Pinchot developed a grazing policy, along with other means, to allow potential reserve users to have a stake in the national forests. (For example, he assured large forest owners in the Pacific Northwest that sustained yield management of the reserves would decrease the amount of lumber entering the market and thereby increase the value of their holdings.)

Yet a few months after the 1905 Forest Transfer Act, Pinchot imposed a system of grazing fees on the reserves. Ranchers accustomed to free use of open range rebelled. "The issue of grazing fees and allotments became the Forest Service's number one problem and was to be the source of almost all the major attacks against it during the next fifty years" (Roth 1980:21). The grazing conflict, coupled with Roosevelt's addition of over 100 million acres to the forest reserves, led Congress in 1907 to ban further creation of reserves in six Western States by the President without the consent of Congress.

By 1908, the Forest Service had a staff of 1,500 in charge of 150 million acres of national forests; under Pinchot the agency was a far different one than the modest forestry information division vacated by Bernhard Fernow in 1898. Fernow had involved the agency in research and State and private cooperative efforts; but without the reserves to manage, his staff was limited to an advisory role. The transfer of the reserves gave Pinchot's staff the opportunity to practice forestry on the national forests. In addition, "unlike Fernow, Pinchot was aware that forestry in the United States meant fire fighting and grazing management as much if not more than silviculture" (Roth 1980:12). These new duties of the Forest Service stem from Pinchot's leadership in forestry, yet it is as a politician that he shines most. To him goes much of the credit for the expansion of the reserves under Roosevelt and, most importantly, the 1905 transfer of the Federal forest reserves to the Department of Agriculture.

Reference

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