

9 Early State Forestry Efforts



State forestry efforts began earlier than Federal efforts, but they tended to be sporadic and not as influential. Between 1868 and 1872, laws offering bounties or tax breaks for tree planting were passed in seven States (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas). This movement to encourage tree culture no doubt influenced passage of the Timber Culture Act (1873), which donated 160 acres of public land to anyone who planted 40 acres of trees that lived for 10 years, to encourage tree planting in the Great Plains. Three years later (1876), Congress provided \$2,000 for an expert to study and report on forest conditions in the United States; Franklin B. Hough was appointed to the post created in the Department of Agriculture, and this office was the beginning of the Forest Service.

Federal forest reserves, however, were not authorized until the Forest Reserve Act (1891) repealed the Timber Culture Act (in part to stop fraudulent homestead claims) and empowered the President to set aside public lands for forest reserves. By that date there was already an existing State forest reserve in New York. Its creation in 1885 illustrates

the overlap of State and Federal forest conservation in the period-two early forestry advocates were involved in the formation of the Adirondack and Catskill Preserve. Charles Sprague Sargent headed the State committee to survey the possibility of a preserve, and its report recommended the site that became the preserve under State legislation developed by Two other figures linked with Federal forest reserve creation were also involved: Grover Cleveland and Theodore Roosevelt, both of whom served as governors of New York before election to the Presidency.

Concern over the impact of forest destruction was a public issue in forested and once-forested areas of the Nation in the 1870's. For example, a section of the constitution of the State of Colorado (1876) urged passage of laws "to prevent the destruction of, and to keep in good preservation, the forests upon the lands of the state ..."

The first State forestry efforts were usually aimed at providing an inventory to assess the extent of forest destruction on public lands. Thus it was that some State forestry commissions were established to investigate forestry conditions, before the 1876 national study funded by Congress. For example, Wisconsin started an inquiry of forest conditions in 1867 and Maine in 1869. The first actual State forestry association was established in Minnesota in 1876. By 1885, California had a State forestry board and in 1888, its State legislature asked the U.S. Congress to cease disposing of public lands in the State, and, instead, to establish forest reserves to protect watersheds.

These early State forestry commissions were often limited to studies of forest conditions and were disbanded once that work was done. The waxing and waning of State forestry organizations makes for an uneven history. What is consistent about State forestry is that its spread often followed the timber industry Active and enduring programs were started in New York and Pennsylvania as part of the early forest conservation movement in the Northeast, site of the first lumber boom. At the turn of the century, the rapid harvesting of Great Lakes pine forests spurred State forestry commissions in Michigan and Wisconsin, and fear of fire danger in logged-over areas (the Hinckley Fire in 1894 killed 814 people in Minnesota) led them to focus on forest fire protection.

After timber harvest peaked in the Great Lakes, activity moved to the southern pine belt, stretching from Virginia to Texas. State forestry in the region followed the same pattern of developing after the peak years of timber harvesting were already over. The first Southern State to establish a forestry unit was Louisiana (1904), the last was Arkansas (1931). By that time, in the last remaining old-growth timber stands of the west coast, forest owners were alert to the need for State forestry efforts, but these were mainly for fire protection. From their beginnings in the late 1860's, State forestry commissions operated in many States but often faded away for lack of funding or State forests to administer. Thus by 1900, only nine States had active forestry associations, usually with little money or trained staff. It was the Federal forestry agency that now played the major role in forestry in the Nation. Under the direction of Fernow, the Division of Forestry assisted State forestry programs. Pinchot replaced Fernow in 1898 and the effort continued to make progress; by 1910, 25 States had some type of forestry organization, although the major impetus was fire protection rather than the larger

practice of forestry advocated by the Forest Service, including reforestation.

Nebraska was one State where the new forestry practices advocated by Fernow were practiced. To encourage scientific forestry and obtain data on actual forest conditions in the days before the National Forest System existed, Fernow and his staff urged forestry research programs at land-grant colleges and experiment stations. Correspondence with botanist Charles Edwin Bessey (1845-1915) of the University of Nebraska was the impetus for establishment of forestry in the Prairie-Plains region. Seedling stock was planted in 1890 in the Sand Hills of Nebraska. These seedlings (mainly pines) were raised in the new Forest Service Bessey Nursery—a pioneer in nursery techniques for large-scale seedling production. Forest Service employee Carlos Glazier Bates (1885-1949), a leader in Great Plains forestry, did experiments there in 1909.

The cooperative forestry done by the Forest Service with the States continued under Pinchot. In 1911, section two of the Weeks Act further encouraged formation of State forestry agencies and the newly created (1908) Forest Service unit—State and Private Forestry—became the leader in Federal efforts to assist State forestry programs, a mission that continues today.

Reference

Robbins, William G. 1985. American forestry: a history of national, state, and private cooperation.

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